

Myself as Text (Extended Version)

Thomas Meinecke

Thomas Meinecke (b. 1955) lives and works in a small Bavarian village. He is the founding member of the band FSK (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle), which has so far released twenty records, and he worked as a DJ for the major public radio station in Bavaria. His 1998 novel Tomboy, a great success with critics and audiences alike, records the interconnectedness of pop music, critical theory, gender, and literary discourses. Both his music and his writings are committed to decoding verbal and nonverbal cultural signals that permeate contemporary life. Accordingly, his latest novel, Hellblau (2001), is concerned with the complexities of ethnic identities in a German-American setting, written from the perspective of a fictional "reader." For Meinecke, as for Warhol, "pop" brings the past into the present. Consequently, in Meinecke's intrinsically present-oriented texts, "pop" serves as a tool to transverse boundaries, not only connecting the United States and Germany but also Germany's "East" and "West."

In 1987 I had a scholarship for the Literary Colloquium Berlin, which was in the western half of the former capital of the German Reich. Or is (more on that later). Most of the scholarship recipients were supposed to come from West Germany, the FRG. Our scholarships were part of an expanded cultural project meant to give artificial respiration to the ex-metropolis that had existed for a good forty years in a geographic as well as political shadow. Our assignment was to delve into this place's so-called state of emergency. Once back in our hometowns (as impressed as we could possibly be, of course), it was expected that we would print our testimonies in book form. A task that, after some initial inner struggle, I obediently carried out, since no other alternative requiring me to stay in Berlin occurred to me at the time. And actually, I'd always written about things I was currently involved with or surrounded by. Finally, my motto was and is "never make something up," never put yourself in a position where you have to invent something.

So I delivered a somewhat eccentric Berlin story titled “Wood,” which actually appeared as a book in 1988, one year before the so-called reunification (of which there was not the slightest sign before 1987). Never one to defend Berlin, I wrote my text in a rather mannered style, remaining aloof from everything, as if I were writing a report about a remote situation many decades past. I wrote set phrases such as there was the wall. There was no-man’s-land. We called the other part of Germany the GDR. And things like that. Everything in the simple past tense. This bothered my former editor; it was actually the only disagreement we had about my manuscript. I just couldn’t express things that way, he remarked. Things that had to do with the plot might be allowed to disappear into this logical past, so to speak, but the wall could not. The two Germanies could not. Of course, I had no objections to the divided nation, and yet I insisted upon my reticent method, which circled in spirals around its subjects; and a very crucial part of that method was the use of the simple past for everything. And so I triumphed over the editor. Ultimately, the reviews tore the book apart for its first-person perspective. For instance, they said, this narrator “I” had not known how to use his half-year Berlin scholarship more sensibly than to try (stubbornly as well as unthankfully) to kill the mayor then in office, Mr. Diepgen. And furthermore, they said, German tax money, even in the form of a scholarship, is not meant for such things. Another mark of the fatal problem of literary reception: the simple-minded craving of bourgeois literary critics for so-called plots.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell for real, but in my book it did not say here is the wall. Here is the no-man’s-land. We call the eastern part of Germany the GDR. At that moment, I belatedly regretted my stylistic decision; my editor, however, could breathe more easily, because now everything was finally correct. Just as it was in reality. The situation became even more piquant when “Wood” appeared once again, in paperback, with a 1999 publication date. The wall stood here. No-man’s-land ran from here to there. And so on. In that year the government moved from Bonn to Berlin. Ten years after the GDR joined the FRG. This is something that the German public has grammatical trouble with, even today, for instance, when people say that Erich Honecker was the head of state of the former GDR. It now appeared to me that the reader might think that the grotesque reticence of my text, at least in some places, was the self-assurance of an author who is master of his material. But, even acknowledging the advantages of productive misunderstanding, I never wanted to be that kind of an author.

My publisher and I agreed that a note on the first page of the book should point out the original publication date. At any rate, I am writing my new novel in the present tense.

ACTUALLY, ALL OF my writing has been about the present. The reaction of my former editor ultimately reflects the expectations of many readers who assume that authors generally put their current level of knowledge on paper. However, to arrive at an agreement with a reader about a common present can also mean agreeing on a common past, which may include having enthusiastically listened to an ABC record in the pop music summer of 1982. Of course, this is not particularly productive. More on that later, too. At the same time, however, there cannot be an absolute “now” in a text. The moment I turn in my manuscript, it obviously becomes a yesterday, a little while ago, a moment ago. The electronic speed of new media, such as the Internet, merely hides this fact. Radio, on the other hand, clearly confronts our ears with the fleetingness of listening. On the radio, you can casually talk about “sending” a text. And as someone who has for a long time worked with this medium, the transmission into the ether, as well as the obvious temporariness of being on the air, have always been welcome to me. Paper, on the other hand, suggests patience, the longest possible stretch of time, immortality, eternity. None of that interests me. Paper leads to the biggest mess. And is thus naturally the most attractive challenge for writers. The fact that Rainald Goetz’s Internet diary *Abfall für alle* not only functioned later as a book but also once again revealed all its greatness comforts me somewhat about that tiresome yet widespread crop of Internet literature, which, from the start, has wanted nothing more than to be printed as soon as possible—on sublime sheets of paper.

When a writer composes a “now,” it should not be about a rather journalistic delusion of actuality. It should be more like the unattainable ideal of capturing a moment in time. The productive paradox of keeping a diary. About the lovely contradiction of an asymptomatic fixation, so to speak, which makes the beloved inadequacy of language constructive. And thus deconstructs language. Which is why literature obsessed with the “now,” with its often uncompromising attitude, sound, and groove (let’s call it pop literature for the next fifteen minutes)—even the kind that is reviled by the bourgeois camp with an almost desperate vehemence—occasionally stands out from most traditional narratives that seek remembrance and usually aim at reconciliation. If you’re going to reminisce, then make it current. Write stories

about the present. Write the history of the present. Which reflects upon the process of writing history. And immediately reveals its expiration date along with it.

Since the “now” is not an exact point in time, but one that marks the pitch, so to speak, of flexible, dynamic stretches of time, I can show this by way of two great writers who impressed me at a very early age—Henry Miller and Andy Warhol. The gist of Miller’s writing was that he was constantly at the heels of his own death: each second of his life was like his last. Warhol, on the other hand, for whom every day was like the first day of the rest of his life, claimed to have no memories at all. Warhol, of course, said this as the greatest pop figure of all time. With his profound trust in repetition and monotony. And his revolutionary expansion of European dialectics, based on the past, deficit, and sorrow, by adding thoroughly euphoric, American tautologies, confronting us with the present, with totals, and with mere profit. Coming from Walt Whitman, the first great American enumerator, Warhol’s aesthetic observations are completely nonironic appreciations of the surface. Having learned from him that the surface is the core. With his signed Brillo boxes, raising the copy to the status of the original, finally rendering the reference itself essential.

This way, pop really does bring the past into the present: through citation. Through sample. Whereby a sample also releases memory. I don’t understand the techno-oriented theoretician’s idealized notion, according to which there ought to be totally reference-free samples. Pop (to which, this time, I will add techno in order to separate them both from rock) cannot be pop when it is completely without references. For instance, the music by the grand Detroit-based techno group Drexciya, with its Afro-diasporic, submarine superstructure, is, of course, anything but free of references or apolitical. Even Andy Warhol, who, as is well known, made the citation the productive center of his art, continually attempted to get as close as possible to the nirvana of referencelessness without becoming completely abstract. Whereby even the abstract is, of course, an abstraction of something concrete. There are quasi-objectless Rorschach images by Warhol that, however, still allude to the psychology of the Rorschach test. There are pictures that, at first glance, seem to be abstract but actually contain the contours of Warhol’s shadow. And there are the piss pictures, upon whose surfaces the artist’s stream of urine has drawn lines that don’t form to anything immediately recognizable but that suggest countless connotations as soon as you find out about the technique with which

they were created. Even if you don't know that Warhol had already fixed many of his famous portraits with his own urine.

Techno means text. The instrumental teaches me how to write. It repoliticizes my consciousness. I can find my way to political reality through techno modulation. Rock, on the other hand, has no texture; it can't tell us anything right now. Apart from the great phallogocentric subject. Rock doesn't want to do anything except ejaculate. Traditional narratives, before techno, before pop, often wanted that, too: they were built on washed-out bridges of tension, the climax, the plot on page 200. It's just too bad that ninety out of a hundred writers still work that way. And others, who, I wrongly believed, stood with me for twenty years in bohemian, strategic, and aesthetic solidarity against this type of work, also claim to have grown up, joined society, and immediately began to demand the heroic restoration of the autonomous subject, the strong individual (a reactionary development that can be compared only to Joschka Fischer's fatal maneuver). Recently seen on a poster in Berlin: the stage as dance floor. Much too early to permit the revival of the traditional author, a figure that has died a well-deserved death. There's no reason for this revival. As before, there is still great mistrust of the supposed genius and his so-called God-given talent.

I want to continue for the time being, probably forever, not writing about myself but away from myself. Around myself. Mark distance. The rest of everything that has been described, that which is left over, could then be called the subject, as far as I'm concerned. The place where it starts. As the rest, outside of my text. My prophylactic working hypothesis remains: the autonomous subject is gone. And with it, the author. Most of my contemporaries haven't even noticed it yet, anyway. Not to mention understood. No trace of that understanding in the collective consciousness of the hybrid subject, no common sense regarding the artificial construction of so-called identity. The progressive, political work under these conditions has just begun. Naturally, the deconstruction of the subject is a much more lengthy, troublesome project than its easy reinstatement as an ear-splitting, strident representative of well-known social constraints and collusions that actually can be overcome through deconstructive analysis.

Deconstruction is, for me, the same as deconstructive feminism, which pulverizes the location of language, the phallic center of power, takes it apart down to its smallest particle. I think it will be a long time before this work is done. Why should it be ended prematurely, then, in

favor of an undead, essentialist chimera known as the autonomous subject? Whose political interest will then, ultimately, be served? Mine won't, at any rate. I think it is especially fatal that those who rave about the renewed introduction of the subject refer to the same objects of study as the deconstructivist Judith Butler. For instance, to transsexuals. There is no longer any talk of how they are victims of the dichotomy of hierarchical gender roles, how they symbolize this disparity, but instead they are glorified as strong, active individuals who were simply able to overcome socially assigned idiosyncrasies. This way the reactionary change of paradigms described previously can, very subliminally, carry the day: both sides can propel the same theme forward, with completely different political intentions.

My first novel, *Tomboy*, published in 1998, revolves around Butler and her theories from the perspective of an adoring fan. More to the point, it's about the construction of all gender identities. Since I've been traveling around and reading from the book, mostly men (who have no interest whatsoever in exploring this complex subject in the first place) take the trouble to let me know that they've heard that Judith Butler is long since *passé*: her theses have nothing to do with political reality; in America they're now talking about completely different matters. But, in fact, none of the social problems expounded upon by deconstructive feminists has even come close to being solved. A British writer who considers herself a feminist recently tried to persuade me that the entire gender discourse is nothing more than the intellectual palaver of the elite. If she wanted to, she could, of course, simply use her royalties to pay for a penis transplant. And become a man. In reality, however, countless transsexuals become prostitutes and die of AIDS before ever having their desperately envisioned and, at any rate, tragic alignment operation, as it's called. Often on a dance floor called the stage.

When, equipped with two record players and a mixing board, I deejay in public, I bring with me a certain pool of sound files, which in English are appropriately enough called records. But I don't know beforehand in which order I will play them. I do know that they will relate to each other in a logical way, that they will fuse together to make a good idea, an intelligent order, at whose gradual creation I am present, standing at the controls, a participating observer. Watching not so much the reaction of the dancers as the signals that come out of the board. Whenever it's possible, I let two different records run synchronically, their impulses upliftingly embracing and intertwining. The excitement builds at moments when it can no longer be clearly deter-

mined from which source which piece originates. By mixing supposedly disparate pieces so that they form a synthesis. When the citation loses its quotation marks.

As a result of various defensive maneuvers against dominant literary concepts, I've learned to write my texts not as an author but as a reader, so to speak. To reproduce my reading process in writing. To take randomly found material, which I did not necessarily properly understand, over which I am not the lord and master, and to let it flow through me. And then to pass it on to other readers. To display the complicated as—complicated. The constructed as constructed. To allow the book to write me, as it were. For once, to let it be more clever than the author. To let the author, the supposed subject, become the object. *Myself as text*. A boundless horror of the original idea. So I sit in my workplace, between towers of books, which are also records, and, following the musical logic of a DJ set, successively extract my material from myself. Naturally, just like a good DJ, I want to deliver a narrative. And I also usually try to avoid letting the records diverge, although that can occasionally be a highly welcome effect. See the language of the writer fall on its face, as in a slapstick movie. I'm always glad to let that happen. I definitely want to tell a completely different story than the rocker's and therefore do not tolerate narrative distractions such as plot, arcs of tension, and climax, beginnings and endings, resolutions or even redemptions. Instead, I try to re-create what I find in techno—an expanse of text whose modulation is as complex as possible. Which isn't masterfully concerned with pop, but, instead, is pop itself. Dynamic, hypnotic, discursive: a record. Disco, house, and techno DJs have given my writing wings, just as the beat generation might have been influenced by Charlie Parker's soulful, deconstructive alto saxophone playing.

Hubert Fichte was pop; he even recorded a live LP in the Star Club. Rolf Dieter Brinkmann was pop. As were many other books published at the time by März Verlag. But pop literature as such doesn't exist. There also is no pop movement. At the most, an attitude. Pop is not an entity that strategically reacts to, for instance, the penetrating attributes ascribed to it. Something that can defend itself against these things. Echoing Rainald Goetz: pop doesn't have a problem. Even when Tony Blair suddenly wants to be pop. I think pop pieces itself together out of innumerable, fast, unpredictable, individual processes, which seem chaotic from the outside and have, as we often hear, arbitrary effects. Which is why pop should not have any manifesto. Pop is a practice. A means. An analytical procedure for dealing with politi-

cally productive methods available on the surface. A means of perception. Pop is reading. Diagnosis, but not prognosis. Not knowledge, but questions. In the standardized system of coordinates not masculine, but feminine. A code accessible to all. And definitely self-referential.

So anyone who is involved with pop is susceptible to all kinds of nostalgic stirrings. The social dangers of dealing with pop are less grounded in its notorious mechanisms of exclusion, but in their opposite: the untimely, rapidly progressing process of aging, usually starting around thirty, involving an emphatic farewell to all things grounded in the present and a deeply sentimental understanding of common past experiences; canonized pop socialization. This process can only once again become pop if it radically turns round and looks toward the future, postulates something new, or finds a new way, as Roxy Music managed to do in 1972. This was a way that did not exist before, a way that can only be described as postmodern, and it gave birth to a new bastard: re-make/re-model. Wolfgang Voigt was equally innovative in the 1990s in Cologne, with polkas, T Rex, and Juliane Werding. Pop is indeed interested in the popular, but pop itself doesn't have to be popular. That is why so much of what is described as pop literature—self-satisfied, backward-looking texts that have fallen prey to the reminiscent gesture—is not pop but, instead, stale literature seeking sympathetic understanding. The new Berlin.

Translated by Allison Plath-Moseley

NOTE

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