CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

László Krasznahorkai

Herscht 07769

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Krasznahorkai's *Herscht 07769* is a political novel not because it deals with explicit party conflicts, but because it analyzes the political, social, economic, and emotional preconditions of radicalisation in contemporary Europe. Set in a declining, fictive East German town, the novel shows how democratic fragility emerges from accumulated resentment, anger, metaphysical disorientation, hopelessness, and institutional erosion rather than spectacular, or incidental rupture. In this novel, radicalisation is neither a heroic nor a demonic process; it is banal, procedural, everyday-like, thus almost invisible sets of action.

The novel takes place in a fictional town of Kana in eastern Germany, a region "famous" for its demographic decline, economic stagnation, resentment, and muted atmosphere of hostility. However, in this novel, Kana is not merely a backdrop or a background but an active social and political organism and a metaphor. The town's abandoned buildings, sense of disorientation, failing institutions and restless inhabitants create the conditions in which extremist ideological narratives can take root. The number in the title, 07769, refers to a Thuringian postcode, situating the narrative within a geography associated with recent years of far-right mobilisation.

At the centre of the novel stands Florian Herscht: a socially awkward, intellectually limited and emotionally fragile young man with a bestial power and forc. He lives under the protective but suffocating care of his boss. Florian is not a politically articulate individual, and he has basically no connection to ideological programs at all, or to the realm of political issues. He doesn't know that such a thing exists at all. Instead, he is characterised by obsessive – sometimes funny – routines, naïve moral impulses, and a profound fixation first on atomic physics, and later on the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. For the Boss, who is a leader of a decentralized neo-Nazi group and organizer of the Kana Symphony Orchestra, and later for Florian, Bach embodies cosmic order, divine harmony, and metaphysical certainty – an abstract structure that promises coherence in an otherwise fragmented and meaningless world.

At first, Florian's existence appears trivial. He carries out menial cleaning tasks, helps others with physical chores, writes letters to public authorities (to Angela Merkel about the Big Bang theory and its consequences for the universe and Germany). He also becomes involved in what appears to be a "civic initiative" aimed at maintaining order in the town. However, it gradually becomes clear that these activities are connected to a broader far-right infrastructure operating beneath the surface of everyday life. A seemingly harmless cleaning enterprise turns out to be a vehicle for ideological networking. Graffiti, coded messages, coordinated local actions, and terrorism signal the presence of informal, yet power-gaining extremist circles embedded in the social fabric of the small town.

Crucially, Florian does not experience a dramatic ideological or political conversion. There is no decisive speech or ideological awakening (yet he does see a video in which it becomes obvious to

him that his boss was responsible for setting fire to a migrant-owned ARAL petrol station). Instead, the novel depicts radicalisation as a slow process of absorption and a shift in character. Florian's longing for order and transcendence is redirected towards narratives of purity, belonging, cultural defence and clear goals. His passivity is pivotal as he becomes a vessel through which structural forces can operate freely, becoming a tool of force and terror rather than an active participant in ideological thinking. In this respect, the novel challenges the conventional psychological understanding of extremism, foregrounding instead vulnerability, loneliness, social invisibility and banality.

Formally, *Herscht 07769* intensifies and depicts this experience through its extraordinary syntax. The novel is written almost entirely as a single, more or less uninterrupted sentence. There are no paragraph breaks and narrative pauses are minimal. The novel's sentences are decentralised and flat. It should be noted, however, that this stylistic decision is not merely an aesthetic experiment of a postmodern novel, but can also be interpreted as a form of political expression. The continuous flow of sentences can generate cognitive saturation. Since everything is expressed in the same way (so a death and an everyday situation are given equal weighting), there is no stylistic or linguistic separation. Readers are denied the comfort of clear segmentation, which possibly mirrors the claustrophobic mental environment in which Florian lives. Repetition, digression and accumulation may also mimic the circular logic of ideological discourse and the endless loops of online information streams.

The novel's historical background remains implicit yet almost unmistakable. The reunification of Germany in 1990 reshaped the economic and social landscape of Eastern Germany, creating structural inequalities that persist to this day. In addition, the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 deepened economic insecurity, particularly in peripheral regions. The 2015 migration crisis intensified public polarisation, especially in eastern federal states. Although the novel avoids documentary realism and does not foreground specific party politics, its atmosphere resonates with the rise of nationalist movements and the consolidation of right-wing networks in regions such as Thuringia.

The figure of Angela Merkel remains part of this broader historical horizon. The political debates surrounding migration, sovereignty, national identity, and possible solutions during her chancellorship provide the backdrop for the fictional events (wolves arrive in the region, evoking the possibility of reading them as metaphors for migratory animals and for migration as such). Yet Krasznahorkai's novel refuses to reduce the narrative to contemporary, realist commentary. Instead, he situates radicalisation within a longer trajectory of post-socialist transformation and European disorientation.

It should also be mentioned that the Bach motif functions as a crucial counterpoint to this disorientation and loss of meaning experienced in the region and in Kana. Bach's music, for the Boss and then for Florian, symbolises transcendence, mathematical clarity, and theological order. For Florian, it offers the promise of meaning beyond social decay. However, he is not fully aware of this; he merely has feelings toward Bach's music, so his stance is not exactly a self-reflexive one. Yet the novel persistently undermines the redemptive power of this aesthetic refuge.

In this sense, the novel poses a question that exceeds the German context. Written by a Hungarian author yet set in Germany, *Herscht 07769* displaces the discussion of democratic erosion from a single national case to a broader Central European condition. The structural similarities between post-reunification Eastern Germany and other post-communist regions become visible: peripheralization, loss of status, and the search for symbolic restitution. The novel suggests that

illiberal tendencies are not anomalies but systemic vulnerabilities within late modern democracies.

Importantly, Krasznahorkai does not present these extremist actors as charismatic villains. They appear procedural, almost bureaucratic, even banal. Their power lies not exactly in theatricality but in organisation and patience, and also in naive expectations. Radicalization is shown to depend less on grand ideologies — Herscht lacks ideological thinking — than on repetition, community formation, the re-channelling of diffuse anxiety, and the sharing of force and extremism. Therefore, Florian's "tragedy" lies not in monstrous conviction, but in his misdirected longing for clarity and safety.

The political force of *Herscht 07769* thus resides in diagnosis rather than prescription. The novel does not propose institutional reform or moral lessons. Instead, it stages the conditions under which democratic societies become vulnerable to destructive myths and extremist forces. By pushing language to syntactic extremes and placing a fragile protagonist within dense historical currents, Krasznahorkai reveals how existential insecurity, hopelessness, and dependency can evolve into collective hostility and terrorism.

Ultimately, the novel confronts readers with a discomforting recognition. Radicalisation is not an external invasion or force but an inside-out development. It can grow from neglect, disorientation, despair, unmet desires for meaning, and passivity. By portraying this process with relentless formal intensity, *Herscht 07769* establishes itself as one of the most significant political novels of contemporary Central European literature.

LANGUAGE: Hungarian/Magyar nyelv

This title was not censored before publishing