

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. Importantly, thus radicalisation here, in this novel, 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 is “famous” for its demographic decline, economic stagnation, resentment, and a muted atmosphere of hostility. But in this novel, Kana is not merely a backdrop or a background but functions as an active social-political organism, also as a metaphor. Its abandoned buildings, loss of orientation, failing institutions, and restless inhabitants create the conditions under which extremist ideological narratives can take root. Also, the number in the title – 07769 – refers to a Thuringian postal code, placing the narrative in a recognisable geography associated with far-right mobilisation in recent years.

At the centre of the novel stands Florian Herscht, a socially awkward, intellectually limited, emotionally fragile, yet bestial in power and force, young man who lives under the protective, but at the same time 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 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 then after a while for Florian, Bach embodies a so to say cosmic order, divine harmony, and metaphysical certainty — an abstract structure that promises coherence in a world otherwise experienced as fragmented, loss of meaning and without clear order.

So Florian's existence appears trivial at first. He performs small 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), and becomes involved in what appears to be a “civic initiative” aimed at maintaining order in the town. Gradually, however, it 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 moment of ideological or political conversion.

There is no decisive speech, no ideological awakening for him (yet he sees a video, where it is becoming obvious to him that his boss was the perpetrator in eliminating the ARAL-gas station, owned by migrants). 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 toward narratives of purity, belonging, cultural defence, and clear goals. His passivity is essential in the novel as he becomes more of a vessel through which structural forces can operate freely (the passivity of ideological thinking, rather he becomes a tool of force and terror). In this respect, the novel resists the conventional psychology of extremism and instead foregrounds 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. Paragraph breaks are absent, narrative pauses are minimal — the novel's sentences are decentralized and flat. Although it needs to be said that this stylistic decision is not merely aesthetic experimentation of a postmodern novel, but can rather be read as a political form of some sort. The continuous flow of sentences can generate cognitive saturation, and since everything is worth the same language-wise (so a death and an everyday situation are similar and close to each other), there is no stylistic or linguistic separation; readers are denied the comfort of clear segmentation, mirroring possibly the claustrophobic mental environment in which Florian lives. Repetition, digression, and accumulation may mimic the circular logic of ideological discourse and the endless loops of online information streams as well.

The novel's historical background remains implicit, but almost unmistakable. German reunification in 1990 reshaped Eastern Germany's economic and social landscape, producing 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 also needs to be mentioned that the Bach motif functions as a crucial counterpoint to this disorientation and loss of meaning experienced in the region and also 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. But he is not really aware of this; he has only feelings toward Bach's music, so it is not exactly a self-reflexive stance. 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 a grand ideology (as Herscht also lacks ideological thinking) than on repetition, community formation, the rechanneling of diffuse anxiety, and the sharing of force and extremism. So to say Florian's "tragedy" lies not in monstrous conviction but in misdirected longing for something clear and safe.

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 susceptible to destructive myths and extremist forces. By pushing language to syntactic extremes and embedding a fragile protagonist within dense historical currents, Krasznahorkai reveals how existential insecurity, hopelessness, and dependency can be transformed into collective hostility and terrorism.

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

*Related organisations

- Alternative für Deutschland

Founded: 6 February 2013

A right-wing populist party that gained significant electoral support particularly in Eastern Germany. Although not explicitly central in the narrative, the political atmosphere depicted in *Herscht 07769* strongly resonates with the party's rise and regional influence.

- PEGIDA

Founded: October 2014 (Dresden)

"Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident." Emerging in Eastern Germany, the movement organised large-scale anti-immigration demonstrations. The novel's portrayal of radicalised public sentiment parallels this mobilisation.

- European Union

Founded: 1 November 1993 (Maastricht Treaty)

As the broader supranational political framework within which German politics unfolds, the EU forms part of the structural backdrop of debates on sovereignty, migration, and democratic legitimacy.

- Christian Democratic Union of Germany

Founded: 1945

The major centre-right party that led the federal government during Angela Merkel's chancellorship. It represents the liberal-democratic political centre against which populist and radical forces positioned themselves during the period reflected in the novel.

- Informal neo-Nazi networks in Eastern Germany

Active particularly since the 1990s (with renewed visibility in the 2010s)

Beyond formal party politics, alternative and loosely organised neo-Nazi and extremist networks have operated in certain Eastern German regions. These decentralised structures – often embedded in subcultural, online, or local activist milieus – form part of the socio-political background against which radicalisation in *Herscht 07769* can be interpreted.

*Related events:

- German reunification

3 October 1990

The accession of the German Democratic Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany. The economic disparities, structural transformations, and identity crisis in the eastern federal states form the foundational social layer of Herscht 07769.

- Global financial crisis

2008–2009

The global financial collapse had long-term social consequences, particularly in peripheral regions. These effects contributed to growing insecurity and political distrust — structural conditions that facilitate radicalisation in the novel's background.

- European migration crisis

2015–2016 (peak: 2015)

The large-scale arrival of refugees and migrants in Germany significantly polarised public discourse. Anti-immigration mobilisation and deepening political divides form part of the novel's implicit political context.

- PEGIDA

Founded: October 2014

“Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident” emerged in Dresden and became a mass movement in Eastern Germany. The radical public mood depicted in the novel has a clear historical parallel in this movement.

- Post-communist transition

1989–early 2000s (with ongoing structural effects)

The period of economic and social transformation following the collapse of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe. The fictional town of Kana embodies the prolonged consequences of this transition.

*Related people:

- Johann Sebastian Bach

The central figure of Florian's metaphysical orientation. Bach's music represents the ideal of order, harmony, and divine structure in the novel, standing in sharp contrast to the surrounding social and political disintegration.

- Angela Merkel

A defining figure of contemporary German political context. The migration crisis (2015) and the intensification of political polarisation in Eastern Germany during the Merkel era form the implicit historical background of the novel.

- Richard Wagner

Another politically charged figure of German musical and cultural heritage. Although not central to the narrative, Wagner evokes questions of national tradition and its nationalist appropriation, which resonate with the novel's broader thematic concerns.

*Related geographical points or zones:

- Germany

The primary national context of the novel. The tensions within contemporary German democracy – migration, populism, and the East–West division – provide the structural background to Florian Herscht's story.

- Eastern Germany

The territories of the former GDR became centres of far-right mobilisation due to post-reunification economic disparities and identity crises. The novel's social environment draws on this experiential world: demographic decline, peripheralisation, frustration and anger.

- German Democratic Republic

Although a historical entity, the East German past persists in mentalities and political structures. The trauma of post-socialist transition forms an indirect yet decisive layer of the novel's background.

- Jena

The postal code 07769 refers to the Thuringian region; Jena and its surroundings are known sites of political radicalisation in Eastern Germany. The fictional town of Kana can be read as an allegorical counterpart to such cities.

- Kana

The fictional East German small town in which the novel is set. Kana functions as an allegorical space — a laboratory of post-industrial decline, demographic erosion, and radicalisation. It is not merely a backdrop but a structuring force that generates political frustration and identity crisis.

- Thuringia

One of the key regional bases of far-right movements in contemporary Germany. Thuringia's political developments resonate strongly with the atmosphere depicted in the novel.

- Hungary

Although the narrative unfolds in Germany, the author's Hungarian perspective is significant. The novel reflects transnationally on illiberal shifts and democratic erosion in Central Europe.

- Central Europe

The broader interpretative frame of the novel. It can be read as a diagnosis of the post-communist political crisis in Central Europe: identity struggles, historical burdens, and renewed East–West tensions.

LANGUAGE: Hungarian/Magyar nyelv

CENSORSHIP STATUS: