

Under suspicion of populism. Political storytelling under the banner of the post-political

The essay project compares two French and two German novels regarding their political storytelling under the banner of the post-political. Even though Michel Houellebecq would strongly reject the accusation of pop-cultural self-marketing, fiction and public enactment are barely separable with him. The author and his novels both came under suspicion of populism even before „Submission“ (2015). The political in Houellebecq's novels manifests itself less in right-wing populist narratives than in the critique of a by now merely commodified liberalism. The staging of trivial everyday practices, of sex and mass consumption, however, proves to be explicitly political in its politically apathetic decadence. Against the theoretical frame of a critique of capitalism, Houellebecq's novelistic work appears to be spiked with fears of competition and displacement, which he invokes just as much in his speeches and interviews. Entirely different the feminist writer Virginie Despentes: With „Vernon Subutex“ (2015-2017) she presented a trilogy of novels that, even though it tells a story of decline in a similar unadorned-vulgar manner, is not a monotonous swansong to pluralism as Houellebecq supposes it, but a social panorama that combines populism and protest in a polyphonous way. In that same field of tension between ‚left‘ and ‚right‘ social criticism raised by Houellebecq and Despentes, Juli Zeh's „Empty Hearts“ (2017) and Monika Maron's „Munin oder Chaos im Kopf“ (2018) can be located. Both authors are criticized for supposedly subordinating their literature to their moral (Zeh) or anti-democratic (Maron) messages. But do the lines between artistic creation and political agitation really blur here or is it rather that sociopolitical dynamics are observed and (satirically) brought to light? Do Houellebecq and Maron simply refuse to give their literature a moral message or is their realist storytelling put into service of a reactionary moral criticism? And in which way could Despentes's and Zeh's novels present an alternative reading of post-political societies?