

A Book like a Bomb

Ursula März, Die Zeit, April 17, 2019

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Brutal and tender in equal measure: Sibylle Berg's new novel "GRM – Brainfuck" is about four young people who rebel against a totalitarian surveillance state.

Sibylle Berg has written a new novel. Well, what passes for a novel, as she would say. "Well, what passes for ..." is one of the tamer turns of phrase that threads through these 640 pages. Sibylle Berg can do brutal too. She can do extremely brutal. To tell the truth, it's difficult to imagine any more brutality than what is contained in this novel with the awkward title *GRM – Brainfuck*. Compared to reading this, the latest work by Michel Houellebecq – not exactly an author with a reputation for rose-tinting the world – is a stroll in the proverbial pony farm. The term cultural pessimism itself seems too pleasant for this relentless litany, whose place in the literary system seems to be somewhere close to apocalyptic monologue.

If that. Because Mrs Berg, as she calls herself, is in a league of her own. She is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of towering hair, caustic columns cultishly revered by her fan base, plus 25 plays and 14 novels translated into 35 languages. She doesn't do readings with a glass of water on a table sitting next to an obsequious literary moderator. She is currently touring the novel with a multimedia stage show and an English band whose musical genre, which presumably arose from punk, is named Grime (hence the slang abbreviation "GRM"), about which this clueless literary critic can only say: it sounds very loud and hammering.

The fact that this same Sibylle Berg was born in 1962 in Weimar of all places, the quintessential hometown of classical German poetry, is a punchline that she might have come up with herself. The fact that, after an exit from East Germany in the mid-80s she ended up via a number of professional diversions in comfortable Switzerland, where she became a kind of grim oracle of late capitalism, fits with the image of an artist who bristles against her own predictability. For all of her diva-ish leanings, no horror escapes her. No drunken family father – "well, what passes for a father" – answering nature in a bucket next to a rat-eaten bed in a council flat. No stride of artificial intelligence in its march towards total power. Because this is what this novel, set in Rochdale and London about a decade after 2019, heads towards: the fantasy of a Chinese-model electronic surveillance totalitarianism behind the camouflage of a social state on a Central European template.

This fantasy does not fall into the genre of the dystopian science fiction book, of which there are a few around at the moment. It is the result of a thoroughly realistic, if extremely bleak extrapolation of the present into the immediate future, which, per Sibylle Berg, looks like this: Brexit is complete. The English economy is now in the hands of Chinese companies. Police and military have been privatized. A swarm of drones hovers above the cities. The prime minister is a kind of grinning avatar. The government, controlled by an IT mafia, imposes a guaranteed basic income for all citizens, but which you can only enjoy if you agree to the implantation of a chip that records all your personal medical data.

Science fiction? If one considers that in 2018 Switzerland introduced a law allowing insurance companies to spy on anyone claiming social security benefits (against which Sibylle Berg helped organize an activists' alliance), the circumstances that *GRM* imagines sound like a radically-conceived idea for a novel. But neither are they conjured from nowhere. At some point towards the end of the story it becomes clear that there is a vast machine behind everything that controls the IT mafia and even the Chinese. But until that point Sibylle Berg lashes out in all directions, in a

staccato, fragmented style: "The people on the streets. Which Karen is standing on. Which she is about to walk home along. Well, walk. Or swim. She took LSD in the laboratory. A devil's substance, so nice and pointlessly retro. Nowadays people take a pill. To cheer themselves up. It's available by the ton, at a price that speaks the language of subsidisation."

All the most perverse, evil, and catastrophic things you can imagine appear: attackers who hack random passers-by to pieces, a rich boy who strangles his young stepmother, tears an embryo from her body and dissolves it in an acid bath, a gang of Pakistani men who keep young girls as sex slaves, a fire in a London high-rise that claims dozens of lives.

Fiction? A real rapist gang was active for years in Rochdale before the English police took pity and listened to its victims. The Grenfell Tower fire happened on June 14, 2017. Both reality. And *Brainfuck* might sound like some bizarre sex whimsy, but is actually the name of a programming language invented in 1993 by a real Swiss computer scientist named Urban Müller. And there really are the "Seven Sisters" tower blocks looming over the urban landscape of Rochdale. This is where the novel's protagonists live, until, abandoned by their parents and any kind of social care, they end up stranded in a Rochdale homeless shelter, before they move to London and take up partisan warfare against the totalitarian chip regime. The sound of Grime is their elixir.

They are four children who grow up in the course of a story that zooms backwards and forwards. Four from under the underclass. They are named Don, Karen, Hannah, and Peter, each as damaged as the next. They suffer from ADHD, or autism, and more generally from the violence done to them. They have one common goal: never to be hurt again.

At regular intervals the complaint arises about a certain sociological narrowing of our contemporary literature: that it is something conceived by members of the academic middle class to process their little problems and the privations of their lifestyles. They know everything about fine class differences, in the manner of Pierre Bourdieu, but nothing of the great arcs, as defined by Marx and co, nothing of the classes of the underprivileged and marginalized. This can't be said of Sibylle Berg. This extravagant author is not just in a league of her own in terms of hair, performance and linguistic style, but also in her literary insights and subject. Nowhere in the German-speaking world is there a novel that pours so much rage into what was once called "asking the class question". There is only one other place where the deprived people that *GRM* encounters in the hovels of Rochdale are granted attention as something to be depicted: in the worst reality shows on the worst commercial TV stations, where they are degenerated into a vulgar, obese, intellectually-challenged human zoo.

Whether you find the monstrosity of Sibylle Berg's new novel repugnant or overwhelming (both conceivable), the simple conviction with which it allows its four small underclass people literary distinction – free of all social romanticism – is a colossal achievement. Looking around in recent literary history for a work of comparable force and a comparably penetrating style, something that might lie ominously on your desk as if you'd brought a bomb into the house, it would perhaps be Elfriede Jelinek's *Lust*, from 1989. The two writers are incidentally also spiritual sisters in their tendency to artificial characters.

But the comparison with Jelinek also reveals Sibylle Berg's most important attribute: the warmth in the brutality. She can do empathy too. She can even do extreme empathy. Another, more proto-Christian note is discernible within her apocalyptic monologue: a pleading tone. If you had to summarize *GRM* in two sentences, they would be a screamed: "Fuck it!" followed by a quieter: "Have mercy on them, for they are but children!" You'd also have to add a political statement: for God's sake, do something about this Europe because in the near future it could look like it does in this novel.

The entire effect is almost a little schizoid. While you're reading, you're constantly longing to escape its brutality. But put it aside for two days and you start to long for its tenderness. Well,

what passes for great literature.