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Hitchcock Marries Nabokov

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Panel: Genre studies. The author discusses the role of genre in today's marketplace

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Hitchcock Marries Nabokov
By Simon Urban (Germany)

The German writer Simon Urban was killed during a panel-discussion by Bennett Sims, John Rector, Sean Doolittle and Tom Crosshill in Iowa City on 12th October 2013.

This is a very good first sentence for a panel-paper. Now I really can hope I have your attention.

The German writer Simon Urban attended a panel-discussion with Bennett Sims, John Rector, Sean Doolittle and Tom Crosshill in Iowa City on 12th October 2013.

This is a very boring first sentence for a panel-paper. I have to face the risk that you'll fall asleep right now. Nevertheless, I hope the second sentence is true.

You see: when I have to talk about genre, I talk about detective-novels, thrillers, and the like. Or, more generally, about suspense. The reason for that is very simple: I am not interested in detective-novels because they sell well, but because people love to buy them. There is a slight difference between the two. Of course it's a nice and even surprising thing if you earn money by writing books. But of course it's even better if you (as a writer) find a way to combine the things you really want to do with the things you are able to do. In my case that means: I am (for whatever reasons) a writer who tries to write about substantial (mostly political) subjects. And I want to reach as many people as possible. That sounds like a contradiction. How many people in your life have you heard say: *Oh, this year I bought some very interesting novels about substantial political subjects for my two weeks of holiday at the beach?* I guess, not so many. But how many detective novel readers do you know? I guess, a lot. I always liked a certain poetological concept very much – the crux of this concept being to produce art where nobody expects it. Sadly, this sentence does not belong to me but to the famous Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt - who is not famous in the USA at all.

I borrowed this concept from Dürrenmatt when I wrote my first novel *Plan D* – a Uchronian story in which the Berlin Wall never fell, and the GDR still exists. Like in Robert Harris' *Fatherland* or Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* there is both a crime plot and a political dimension in the novel. But my experiment was to broaden this classic combination with biting satire on the reunited Germany of our times. What I just called the "substantial political subject" was the intention to sabotage the far too positive reputation the real GDR and the downplaying of the merciless way the SED regime exerted power over millions of people.

So the detective novel genre was my trap to tempt people to buy a crime story and to read (hopefully) more than that -- perhaps even what some people call *literature*. I wanted Hitchcock to marry Nabokov. That might sound a little bit gay but I've always believed in unusual unions.

I wanted to go one step further with my second experiment. The novel that I am finishing at the moment is about a world under the control of religions and subject to their worst rules. In this world, the monotheistic religions are united in peace, and every religious law of Catholics, Muslims, Protestants and Jews applies to every man on the planet. The four anonymous religious leaders live together on a tropical island with a little population of orthodox believers. Then there is a murder in that happy paradise of "sacral sacks" (as the protagonist calls them) – and an absolutely atheistic hardboiled detective has to find the murderer.

Again, I tried to build a trap with a detective novel, this time in the noir tradition of Chandler, Hammet, and company. Again the novel is – I think – a satire. And it's a very political polemic against any kind of religion. But that's still not everything. There is also a formal experiment in it, the attempt to combine comics and prose. The book will contain several comic panels, the prose switching into comic and then back to prose. Last but not least, I tried to combine these two categories by writing a kind of comical prose, using, for example, onomatopoeiac words such as *oink*, *meow*, *roar* or *chirp*. So perhaps I can call this project a political-noir-satire-comic-thriller-polemic-novel.

What I tried to show with these little descriptions of my work is that genre is important to me because it offers the very best opportunity to be hook a reader. It's like an empty container that is usually refilled with the same product. Nobody expects the product to change – and this is precisely why I like to change it. After thousands of years of literature the only way to produce real originality might be to cross the borders of genre. I feel sorry for all the Republicans in the audience, but perhaps Hitchcock should marry not only Nabokov but also Tarantino. I think that would really be maximum sexy.