The Institution of Criticism

Hohendahl, Peter Uwe

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5  Promoters, Consumers, and Critics: On the Reception of the Best-Seller

There was a time—some look back on it with longing, others with abhorrence—when the world of literature and literary criticism was still in good order, when literary historians and reviewers still knew (or seemed to know) exactly what they were supposed to be doing, when one could speak with a clear conscience about "poetic literature," and when such profane topics as the mass distribution of books were examined at the very most by a few specialists in library science. It was well known, to be sure, that best-sellers existed and that they were on occasion reviewed in newspapers and journals. Nevertheless, the critical attitude toward these phenomena of the book market was fixed a priori: it seemed obvious that mass distribution of literature and aesthetic quality were mutually exclusive. Accordingly, best-sellers could only be discussed in depreciating terms. Anything that pleased the taste of the broad reading public was automatically excluded from the canon of serious literature. Worthwhile literature is accessible only to small circles of readers within modern mass society; it achieves no high sales figures and is not absorbed by the market. Any work, therefore, which attains an unusual success in sales is somewhat suspect and is quite possibly no longer worthy of critical analysis.

This is not the place to analyze the birth and development of this attitude, and I will restrict myself to an examination of its

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results. This self-image of criticism and literary research, rooted in the aesthetic distance from the broad reading public which is the stamp of the modern literary age, results in a horizontal apportionment of critical endeavors. Producers of literature have a label of quality attached to them in the literary marketplace, a label that determines the future extent and type of reviewing. A mediocre novel by Heinrich Boll is nonetheless a Boll novel, and as such receives wide attention in the national press, while a novel by Johannes Mario Simmel remains a Simmel novel, and thus is reviewed primarily in local newspapers. The extent to which this concept of “niveau” has hindered criticism and literary research was demonstrated again a few years ago by Helmut Kreuzer in his critical contribution to the examination of “trivial literature”: despite researchers’ efforts to broaden their subject matter and to include so-called trivial literature in their field of research, the traditional differentiation between “serious” literature and “trivial” literature remained for the most part intact, so that the advance into uncharted literary regions was again checked. Some critics sought to destroy this polarity by expressly denying any aesthetic element in entertainment literature and assigning it other functions. But even they remained caught in time-worn categories; the denial of aesthetic merit in popular literature and the emphasis on its communicative function served to affirm the dichotomy between poetic and trivial literature. Only when we divorce ourselves from the prejudices of our literary tradition, when we resolve to examine the process of literary communication in its entirety, will we be able to subject the relationship of best-sellers and literary criticism to a critical analysis that can accomplish more than the perpetuation of rigid cultural values.

The first task would be to take stock of the present situation. Which newspapers review best-sellers? Who, in fact, writes about a novel by Hans Habe, Johannes Mario Simmel, or Hans Helmut Kirst when major critics like Reinhard Baumgart and Walter Jens

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1For a further investigation see Jochen Schulte-Sasse, Die Kritik an der Trivialliteratur seit der Aufklärung: Studien zur Geschichte des modernen Kitschbegriffs (Munich, 1971), esp. pp. 63-129.

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remain silent? Who provides critical information to the prospective buyer about this field of literature? Or is it simply left to the publishers' advertising agencies to describe the strengths—though hardly the weaknesses—of the writer in question? Do reviewers have any influence at all on public opinion? With what criteria do critics approach best-sellers and their authors? To whom do they direct their statements of opinion? Questions upon questions, which have found few answers. To my knowledge, only Peter Glotz has dealt with these processes of communication and formulated hypotheses based on hard evidence.3 According to him, literary criticism is carried out in various realms of communication, depending on whether it concerns a best-seller categorized as serious or as trivial literature. Although a book by Uwe Johnson, as one might expect, is reviewed by prominent critics and authors in the national press, Kirst's books are reviewed chiefly in second-rank provincial journals and local newspapers.

Until now, the term “best-seller” has been used as though it were self-explanatory. We call a book a best-seller when its sales are extraordinarily high.4 Since the concept is based on quantity, it seems less of a problem than the concept of trivial literature. The troublesome question of value is excluded; statistics alone decide whether a book is a best-seller. But the impression that there is a clear demarcation is deceptive. All statistics must incorporate boundaries. Is a book a best-seller when it sells twenty thousand copies, or must it reach five hundred thousand? Such distinctions are arbitrary, especially when one compares different book markets and different eras.5 Although one needs statistics in dealing with best-sellers, statistics alone do not provide a clear genetic and structural explanation of the phenomenon. It is worth noting that the term appears to have been in use

3Peter Glotz, Buchkritik in deutschen Zeitungen (Hamburg, 1968). See also my review in German Quarterly, 44 (1971), 441-450.

4In earlier investigations the best-seller was often equated with the trivial novel and thus defined in psychological terms (oriented toward the reading public) or aesthetic terms (kitsch). Cf. the findings of Sonja Marjasch in Der amerikanische Bestseller (Bern, 1946), pp. 23-24.

5Frank L. Mott, for example, proceeds from the idea that a book is a best-seller when the number of copies sold equals one percent of the total population of the decade of its publication. See his Golden Multitudes: The Story of Bestsellers in the United States (New York, 1947), p. 7.
only since 1895, when the journal *Bookman*, using empirical methods of research, began to print regularly a list of "books in demand." This concept is thus inextricably bound to the methods of book production and consumption in the age of high and late capitalism. The interest in exact numbers began at a time when the book trade was assuming a more active role in directing the literary market. What was previously left for the most part to the natural growth process of production and consumption was now used—though at first in a very modest form—as a means of advertisement: success in terms of quantity served as an index of quality.

The best-seller is a product of the twentieth century, sociohistorically as well as economically. In the nineteenth century certain preconditions for this phenomenon were developed: first, the reading public expanded through the inclusion of social strata below the educated bourgeoisie, for whom books had previously been economically out of reach (we should not be too easily deceived by reports from the early nineteenth century; regular purchases of books were possible then only for the upper classes); second, reading habits developed that were based on the continuous consumption of literature (resultant to some extent, no doubt, from the introduction of serialized novels in magazines and newspapers in 1840); third, the technology of book production advanced, permitting the rapid printing of large numbers of books at low prices. The interdependence of these factors led to what we now call best-sellers. The contemporary best-seller is no longer an accidental success, as it was in the nineteenth century, but a planned one, using all the marketing and promotional techniques at its disposal. This means that only publishing houses with great capital resources can produce such

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7 For the sociohistorical background, see Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, 1957).


9 From the introduction of the rotary press in 1811 to the Walter press in 1866, which could print 12,000 double-sized eight-page sheets per hour; in addition, the possibility of mass production of cheap paper since 1840.
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a commodity. The tendency toward planned best-sellers was strengthened by the transition from middle-class family enterprises to a large-scale book industry. And today the giant publishers can no longer do without best-sellers if they are to remain financially successful. In order to avoid going into the red, they must push a big money-maker through the market at regular intervals in order to cover the cost of numerous unsuccessful ventures and their high operating expenses. This is not to say that the production of best-sellers is without risks. Managers and chief editors are well aware that even today, despite sophisticated market research, the success of a book with a large printing cannot be safely predicted.

The seemingly irrational element in the calculations of publishing houses and book retailers can be fully explained in retrospect. In terms of the sociology of the reading public, the best-seller represents the special case of a book which surpasses its intended readership. In the words of Siegfried Kracauer, "Huge sales figures are the mark of a successful sociological experiment, the proof that once more a mixture of elements has been found which corresponds to the taste of an anonymous audience of readers." Robert Escarpit was correct in pointing out that the best-seller is defined not by the amount, but by the pattern, of sales. The usual sales chart of a book of belles-lettres shows a sharply rising curve which then falls slowly until sales reach a near halt after approximately a year. The curve of a best-seller differs from the expected pattern by rising once again. Its sales graph exhibits a wave pattern; the number and height of these waves reflect the extent to which the book has reached beyond its original circle of readers. The breakthrough can come about in several phases. The crucial boundaries in the German and French book markets are 10,000, 50,000, and 100,000 copies. Only when sales surpass 100,000 copies can we speak of a true

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best-seller that is reaching the broad reading public—that is, even readers who only occasionally purchase a book.\(^{13}\)

The sales pattern outlined by Escarpit can serve as an index to the sociology of the reading public. The best-seller is a book that finds strata of readers beyond the group to which the author initially directed his work. In contrast to the novels written for serialization in magazines, and to the schematically produced entertainment novels for lending libraries, which are written for a known public (the right length of a serialized novel is judged, for instance, by the continuing sales of the magazine), a consensus among readers in the open book market, the basis of any best-seller, must be recreated each time. The task of the publishing firm is to establish the book as a topic of conversation. In a highly specialized society based on division of labor, the best-seller fulfills an important function in providing the potential for social contact.\(^{14}\) It supplies its readers with a special gratification in offering a ready topic of conversation with other readers, with whom they have little else in common.\(^{15}\) In this process the

\(^{13}\) One should not be fooled by the best-seller lists of *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*, for they are based on surveys of selected bookstores and not, as should be absolutely necessary, on confirmed data from the publishing houses. The lists in the press provide only an approximate index to the popularity of literary works. The advertising departments of the publishing firms concede that these figures can be manipulated.

\(^{14}\) Experienced publishers who know their authors have a feeling for the originally intended reading audience. They intuitively know its specific reading needs, desired and forbidden themes, and preferred writing styles. They can advise their authors in this regard. Beyond that they depend on the observation of trends in the various realms of literary communication to seek out new readers. The Rowohlt firm, for instance, speculated on the audience of the Sunday magazines and family journals when it decided to market Eric Malpass' book *Morning at Seven* as a best-seller (it had not been very successful in England, selling only 5,000 copies). Although the conditions in England described by Malpass are not identical to those in Germany, there was a foundation on which the publishing firm could build, namely the milieu of the rural family—that is, distance from modern society with its burdensome problems. With this they could attempt to reach that considerable portion of the German population which still yearns for the harmony of the pre-industrial world and rejects such literary tendencies as the depiction of sex and crime. The success of the book was thus based on its repudiation of a certain fashionable trend and its likeness to a genre with an established audience, the *Heimatroman* (novel of the homeland). The mild departure from the basic pattern through the English milieu may have helped the novel to find readers who would have ignored a similar German product.

\(^{15}\) Cf. Wellershoff in *Literatur und Veränderung*, p. 140.
institutions of the culture industry, such as the press, radio, and television, serve an indispensable function, as publishers are well aware. Except in the case of a few authors whose sales come automatically, as it were, only the use of the mass media can bring a work the degree of attention in the public sphere which is needed to achieve high sales figures. In the past ten years the creation of best-sellers has entered a new stage. The tendency is toward programing, a process in which the transition from the originally intended readership to other groups and finally to the general public is no longer left to chance but is carefully planned. Once the path to a programed best-seller is taken, there is no turning back, for the resulting expenses can be recovered only by sales that would be considered astronomical by traditional standards.

For the best-seller industry, authors and their works are interchangeable. Aesthetic criticism is thus inappropriate. The best-seller does not belong *eo ipso* to the category of trivial literature. In the past culture critics made the error of constructing a logical, immanent contradiction between aesthetic quality and printing quantity.16 “Social uplifting,” the transfiguration and harmonization of reality, the psychological facilitation of reading by fulfilling the public’s expectations—these factors can contribute to the success of a work but are not, in my opinion, necessary conditions. Otherwise it would be impossible to understand how works of “high literature” can appear on the best-seller lists.17 Interchangeability means that the original characteristics of a work and its author are replaced by secondary ones. This image-building is not confined to popular literature, however. The daring, if not indecent, tone of Günter Grass’s writing certainly helped the sales of *The Tin Drum*, though it has nothing to do with the structure of the text. Of crucial importance for mass

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16For example, Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London, 1932).
17Too narrow is a definition that emphasizes the psychological facilitation provided by a particular writing style, as stated, for example, by Marjasch, *Der amerikanische Bestseller*, p. 23: “The modern best-seller is characterized by a typical element of style, the ‘particular touch’ of best-selling authors, which is achieved through constant, conscious repetition, so that the reading public, once it is familiar with certain authors, can recognize it immediately.” That statement applies to Simmel and Kirst but hardly to Thomas Mann, whose *Buddenbrooks*, it must be remembered, was also a million-seller. For America see also Roger Burlingame, *Of Making Many Books* (New York, 1946), pp. 136–137.
selling power is the creation of reading attraction that can be attached to the text. The planning of a best-seller must incorporate the current conversational topics of the public sphere in order to emphasize the up-to-date nature of the article being sold. This interchangeability of author and work underscores the often observed fact that the publisher is primarily responsible for the success of a book. Only a work with the highest level of marketing and promotional techniques can survive in the competition among new titles. It is the publisher who provides the book's marketable "finish." The reader knows what to expect from Rowohlt, Molden, or Droemer. What Escarpit vigorously disputed has now become a fact—production and merchandising of literature have taken on the forms used in the auto industry. This involves making the sale of a product independent of its use value. Various means are available to accomplish this: (1) market research into the needs of the audience (the Bertelsmann publishing firm, for example, engages at regular intervals respected organizations which analyze the impact of its production); (2) the entire arsenal of advertising ploys, from in-house articles to carefully arranged publicity tours for authors; (3) complete exploitation of rights in the media market.

The chief difference between the modern programed bestseller and its nineteenth-century predecessor lies in the utilization of the media "network"—that is, passing the same material through various media to exploit fully its profit-making potential. In contractual terms: the subsidiary rights are often more important than the original book edition. To exaggerate only a little, the original edition is merely a display window in which the publishing house exhibits its wares for other purposes. In the traditional book trade, the sales of the original edition were calculated to cover costs and secure a profit. In the programed best-seller, however, the further sale of subsidiary rights is anticipated from the outset. For the Rowohlt publishing firm, the latest book by C. W. Ceram, Der erste Amerikaner (The First American), will barely turn a profit even if more than 125,000

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copies are sold. The purchase of the rights and the advertising costs were so exorbitant that only the succeeding paperback edition or the sale of the rights to a book club will make it a profitable venture. Since the subsidiary rights are so important, the programed best-seller must reach its predicted sales figures, for if it should fail, the profit potential of those subsidiary rights would be endangered. As a result, the sales figures must be driven upward at any cost, or at the very least the impression must be created that the book is selling well. The publishers are by no means averse to using, on occasion, various tricks of the trade that may help them gain an advantage in their dealings with book clubs or the film industry.

Under these circumstances, advertising (in its broadest sense) attains an importance completely alien to the traditional book trade. Since large amounts of capital are at stake, which must be amortized rapidly, the reception of a novel cannot be left to the usual needs of the audience. The public must be conditioned, even though it has already been largely disoriented by a flood of advertising stimuli. This conditioning begins with such seemingly innocuous matters as the design of the jacket and its blurb. It includes an intensive and extensive advertising campaign in newspapers and magazines carefully chosen for their particular readership, and also involves a planned release of information to the mass media, so that even before the book appears, public interest is aroused by provocative statements. Such new best-seller advertising replaces slow, cumulative effects

20 According to a statement to me from Dr. Matthias Wegner, director of Rowohlt Verlag.
21 Under Samuel Fischer, the Fischer Verlag restricted its advertising to notices in the Börsenblatt and an occasional prospectus. The advertising budget was small. Collective advertisements were placed in the national newspapers twice yearly to promote new titles. Cf. Gottfried Bermann-Fischer, Bedroht—Bewahrt: Wege eines Verlages (Frankfurt am Main, 1967), p. 33.
22 It is with good reason that the manager and chief officials of such a publicity-conscious publishing firm as Rowohlt seclude themselves for several days when planning a best-seller in order to produce the most effective jacket blurb possible. For the jacket blurb represents the book's calling card, heavily relied upon by the specialists of the media industry, who insist on quick information. If they succeed in finding the appropriately enticing phrases, they can be sure of having supplied a good many of the critics with the formulaic expressions that will appear in their reviews. A well-written jacket blurb multiplies its effect through the numerous reviews for which it serves as a model.
by a comprehensive strategy that coordinates individual initiatives in such a way that each reflects back on the others. When the film rights are sold, the publisher can take advantage of the publicity from the filming, and the film studio, of course, benefits from the book advertising.

The promotion of Erich Segal’s *Love Story* has become a classic example. To a lesser extent, Rowohlt’s advertising department utilized this effect during the filming of Eric Malpass’s *Morgens um sieben ist die Welt noch in Ordnung* (*Morning at Seven*). In an interview with Dieter E. Zimmer, advertising chief Eric Merwick remarked: “The Constantin studio bought the rights, and from that moment on, the publisher, the film producers, and the rental agency worked together in the advertising sector. All the competitions we held—the search for a child star, for locales—everything you could imagine, we did it together, in the press, for the public. And naturally there were new peaks of interest, and people talked about the book again and again.” They did not seek the cooperation of the literary critics so much as that of the local news editors—for stories about the selection of the star, the work on the set, and so on. These reports in the local news sections were usually replete with photos, and the advertising agencies were correct in anticipating very effective results from them, since the local section of a newspaper is read more extensively than the literary page. The culture editors are not consulted again until the finished movie or television film is ready for release to the public. In principle, of course, this achieves the same effect—the multiplication of publicity through the network of media. “With a few exceptions,” Zimmer notes, “the bestseller today needs the help of other media, of the interlocking media network. A book can hardly succeed by itself any more.”

This judgment has to be modified. The cooperation of the media is indispensable if the publisher wishes to surpass the 100,000

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24According to Glotz (*Buchkritik*, p. 214), reviews are read by fewer than 10 percent of the readers, while the local news section is read by nearly 80 percent. See Peter Glotz and Wolfgang Langenbucher, *Der missachtete Leser* (Cologne, 1969), p. 101.

25Zimmer, p. 112.
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mark—that is, if he seeks to tap the reservoir of passive readers who only seldom decide to purchase a book.  

The modern best-seller business cannot do without the aid of the mass media. Conversely, the media profit from the publicity accorded best-sellers. In a highly differentiated realm of communication, in which isolated, specialized groups of readers exist side by side, the best-seller provides a potential crystallization point for public discussion. It is worth noting that Der Spiegel, which offers a popular, simply written form of literary criticism, reviewed in its own pages no fewer than thirteen of the thirty-four titles appearing on its best-seller list of 1970. And obviously the Spiegel list serves more than its own staff as a guide for books to be reviewed: the local and provincial press gladly follow its lead.

One group of periodicals, to be sure, stubbornly resists the media resonance of the best-seller—the literary and cultural journals. Of the thirty-four books on the 1970 Spiegel best-seller list, Der Monat reviewed three, Neue Rundschau one, and Akzente none at all. The barrier between “highbrow” and “middlebrow,” about which Q. D. Leavis wrote so confidently some forty years ago, still exists here. The price of this abstinence is low circulation. Not one of the above-mentioned journals (one of which has since ceased publication) reached more than 5,000–10,000 readers.

Promotion departments, in the traditional publishing firm of earlier times merely an appendage for collecting and transmitting reviews, are now highly developed and equipped with sizable budgets. Their functions include guiding the initial readings, the proofs, arranging interviews, communiqués, and organizing radio and television discussions. The traditional allocation of 5 percent of the total costs for advertising purposes is no longer adequate to establish a best-seller. To cite some examples: the Molden Verlag guaranteed Hildegard Knef DM 250,000 for advertising alone for her memoirs; Hoffmann and Campe spent DM 120,000 on the German edition of Love Story; and the Droemer Verlag paid DM 100,000 to promote Irving Stone’s biography of Freud. These sums necessitate a programed promotion campaign like the one mounted by the Molden Verlag for Hildegard Knef: The first readings were conducted seven months before publication; four months later came the onset of an intensive ad campaign in the press, accompanied by a “promotion package” for bookstores, consisting of a complimentary copy of the book, a record, and an autographed postcard; also regular communiqués to radio and television stations, a renewed ad campaign shortly before the appearance of the book, and finally a well-publicized tour for the author, with “gala evening receptions for book merchants and the press.” Cf. Panskus, “Buchwerbung,” p. 79.
Thus I return to my first question: Who reviews best-sellers? If 18.9 percent of book purchases are stimulated by the press, one must concede a significant influence to literary criticism. This view is not shared by the market experts who maintain that reviews exert for the most part no great influence on the total sales of a book. I would like to pursue this issue, using the example of Habe's novel *Das Netz* (*The Net*, 1969). There are a number of reasons for this choice. Habe is not content to be known as an author who provides cheap entertainment to the masses. He wants to be taken seriously and to be noticed by the leading newspapers and literary critics. A good deal of Habe's vehement aggressiveness toward the liberal and Leftist West German intelligentsia can be explained by his fear of rejection. This is not entirely unfounded, for there does exist in West German book-reviewing a tendency to avoid the sphere of popular literature. To be legitimated, German critics who value their reputation must discuss literature of the most experimental sort. It is no coincidence that Marcel Reich-Ranicki noted in regard to Habe's book: “Certainly a decidedly 'trivial' novel is analyzed occasionally, and its reviewers try hard to give their work a highly scientific flavor. But when it comes to books that might possibly be worth discussing as entertainment, German criticism always gives them a wide berth.”27 By writing this and extensively discussing *Das Netz* Reich-Ranicki did not absolutely disprove his own assertion, but he did contribute somewhat to making it obsolete. For this novel by Habe gained more than attention from the local and provincial press; it was found worth reviewing by such leading national newspapers as *Die Welt*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, and *Christ und Welt*, not to mention *Der Spiegel*, which made this reviewing phenomenon the subject of a critical commentary. Thus in Habe's case we have an opportunity to study the reception of a best-seller that reached out into several realms of communication. We can investigate the launching of a best-seller, the unfolding of public debate, the role of advertising, and the significance of the mass media. And finally, the Habe case illustrates the possibilities of external influence on the institution of literary criticism.

Although the jacket blurb's reference to Habe as “one of the

most admired and most controversial authors of our time” belongs to the advertising clichés used by every firm for its best-selling author, the exaggeration contains an element of truth: the publicist Hans Habe, experienced in dealings with the mass media, made sure that his novel remained a topic of conversation. Never burdened with false modesty, he voiced his own views of his work both before and after the publication of Das Netz. The moralistic-allegorical interpretation of this novel, mentioned repeatedly in numerous later reviews, originated with Habe. Even before the public could obtain the book and form its own opinion, Habe let it be known in an interview with Welt am Sonntag (27 April 1969) how the text should be read: “In an age of confusion, I believe the hour of clarity has arrived. I must exemplify the sickness. Of all the sicknesses that society cannot accept, cannot tolerate, the use of force is the most intolerable of all. The use of force is symbolized most clearly in murder. In opposition to unrest for its own sake, I have tried to establish tragic unrest.”

The troublemakers were clearly identified in the interview—the Leftist writers who, according to Habe, control West German literary criticism. His literary tirade is political in this instance, for the literature written by the Leftists contributes, he claims, to the confusion of public opinion. It hinders the propagation of an easily comprehensible writing style and, with its experiments in form, dissolves the sociopolitical order that Habe declares inalienable. Habe’s assertion in this interview is used by editors as a headline: “Literary Cliques as Arsonists.” Habe, who feels he has been boycotted by the national newspapers (“I yield only to the terror of the literary apparatshik”), turns instead to the millions of silent readers of his books (“There is no serious conflict between the German reader and myself”) and recommends his novel quite openly as an ideological support of law and order. He suggests that groups that are dissatisfied with the “corrupt world” may find help in his novel. In another interview he refers to himself as “an angry old man” who speaks for the oppressed majority of persons over thirty years of age.28 As elements of oppression he lists the corruption of the mass media, the demands of confused, demonstrating young people, and the

28Manuscript of an interview with the Allgemeine Jüdische Wochenzeitung.
power of the Leftist intelligentsia, which serves the interest of Communism. It is not surprising that part of the West German and Swiss press printed these views in four- to five-column articles. Both sides found this pact beneficial—Habe created an atmosphere conducive to reading his novel, and this faction of the press (namely the Springer publications) found a prominent spokesman for its ideas.29

All too conspicuously, these Springer publications made sure that Habe’s new novel became well known. A three-column article in the Hamburger Abendblatt (27 March 1969) was the start. And ironically, it involved precisely what Habe had denounced in Das Netz—the article’s lead-in was the murder of Habe’s own daughter in Hollywood on December 12, 1968. In April Habe was interviewed by the correspondent of the Welt am Sonntag. On May 17 even the Bild-Zeitung, which seldom deals with literature at all, printed a report cum interview under the heading, “The Book That Wasn’t Supposed to Be Published,” in which once again the novel was linked to the incident in Hollywood. Whereas the Welt am Sonntag spoke of “compelling reading,” the Bild went a step further: “Hans Habe’s Netz is as gripping as a detective story.” A few days later, on May 22, two Springer newspapers dealt with the novel once again. The Abendblatt followed its article with a book review, and the Welt printed a positive review by Willy Haas, who wrote, “Its structure is so unified that it finally becomes a portrait of the morality of an entire epoch.”

If the tortuous style of the review is any indication, Haas was not fully at ease praising the novel, though it appears he had no choice but to write it: Editor-in-Chief Herbert Kremp had given him the assignment. The Welt am Sonntag also took up the theme

29 The alliance between Hans Habe and Springer goes back to 1967, when he wrote an open letter to the newspaper publisher in which he defended Springer’s press empire, which was under heavy attack at the time. In his letter, printed in the Welt, he wrote, among other things: “Not their [Springer’s] newspapers but their enemies are the real sources of danger to German democracy, which is already in a precarious position. They thereby endanger the democracy of Europe as well, which was placed in a basket and abandoned by its parents.” And: “They have not subjected German cultural life to the rule of a clique; . . . they have merely realized a small part of their dreams; they have not established a bogey man or set up idols, either in the political or the cultural realm, as their opponents have.” Quoted from Der Spiegel, 16 June 1969, p. 163.
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once more—three weeks after the interview it printed an extensive review of the book. And in Berlin, the *Berliner Morgenpost* spread the corporate opinion by accenting the book’s “passionate social criticism.” The stance taken by every Springer publication was positive. Of primary interest was the ideologue Hans Habe, whose “healthy” views could now be circulated in literary form. Even the review written by Willy Haas, otherwise far more differentiated than the rest, was no exception in that regard. The picture of Habe drawn by the Springer newspapers was identical to Habe’s self-image even in its nuances. Although Habe had vehemently criticized the mass media, along with other things, in *Das Netz* (the publisher Carlo Vanetti, unscrupulous owner of the magazine *Quest'Ora*, could remind German readers of Axel Springer), this obviously did not influence their accord. Hans Habe did not feel compromised by the advertising strategy of the Springer empire, and its editors obviously were correct in their assessment of the direction of Habe’s social criticism.

By virtue of its discussion in influential, widely circulated newspapers (in some instances, even before it was released to the public), *Das Netz* avoided the fate of many best-sellers which achieve high sales figures but are ignored by the national and international press. Habe thus gained something generally denied to Kirst and Simmel, since they had been stamped as “magazine novelists”—the attention of at least a few prominent critics. The extensive review in the *Welt* was a provocation that was answered by *Die Zeit*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, and *Der Spiegel*. The initial impetus provided by the Springer press was certainly useful to the Walter Verlag, which published the novel, but it was not the only means used to gain publicity. All forms of sales promotion were utilized. Effective cover notes which cleverly summarized the contents and theme of the novel were composed. The sentence “Eight people do business with death” was frequently quoted by reviewers. Personal endorsements and praise were solicited for quotation on the jacket. Complimentary copies were widely distributed to reviewers so that the first reviews would be ready as soon as the book was available to the public. But the Walter Verlag, to which Habe had switched after a previous association with the Desch Verlag, paid particular attention to the regional Swiss press. The new author was de-
picted as a friend and admirer of Swiss democracy and a victim of alleged oppression in West Germany. The purpose was to establish Habe, who had lived in Switzerland since 1960, as a Swiss literary figure as well. This gambit was a success, as the numerous reviews in the local Swiss press attest. It cleverly played on the patriotic pride of the Swiss people and their feeling of superiority over the surrounding democracies by virtue of the age and maturity of the country. A gala reception for the press, held in an elegant Zurich hotel on May 19, 1969, and attended by prominent visitors from Switzerland and abroad, gave the media a welcome excuse to report on both the book and the author. Though the English edition had already appeared in London (it was later given a negative review by the Times Literary Supplement), this did not detract from the excitement of the premiere; on the contrary, it contributed to the “international” atmosphere of the book being promoted. Few press accounts failed to mention that several foreign editions were being prepared. Although these observations in the mass media could not be verified by the newspaper reader and were not at all relevant to the quality of the novel, they seemingly enlarged the extent of the book’s reception and provided the air of cosmopolitanism so suited to the modern best-seller.

We will characterize briefly the details of the press reaction—the number and length of articles, the types of newspapers, and the influence of certain evaluations on other reviews. Most revealing is a comparison with another best-seller of the same category: Kirst’s Fabrik der Offiziere (Officer Factory, 1960). Peter Glotz wrote about the impact of this novel: “Kirst’s book was analyzed in the German press times. Newspapers with national circulation, however, almost never dealt with it. The only

31This was very clearly expressed in a full-page interview with Franz Disler, who was often referred to in the press as Habe’s biographer. Habe’s opinion of Switzerland: “It is a good country and it is good to be a citizen of this country.” On the form of government: “I believe that plebiscite democracy is the only modern, viable form of democracy. Every time the Swiss vote on a new schoolhouse, democracy is born anew” (AZ-Solothurner Ausgabe, 9 July 1970).
exceptions were *Die Zeit*, which printed an extensive and in many ways interesting report by Robert Neumann on *Fabrik der Offiziere*, and the now defunct *Deutsche Zeitung*. A great number of the reviews appeared in very small newspapers, including weekly ones and ones containing local news only.\(^{33}\)

Habe's novel, too, was discussed in very small newspapers, not only in Switzerland but in West Germany and Austria. As a rule we find short critiques, which generally rely on jacket blurbs. There are exceptions, to be sure—for example, the *Wetzlarer Neue Zeitung* (21 August 1969), the *Badische Neueste Nachrichten* (16 October 1969), and the *Wolfenbüttler Zeitung* (22 October 1969)—which had a fresh approach to the novel. Habe's impact differs from Kirst's in regard to the newspapers of national circulation. In addition to the ones already mentioned, *Die Rheinische Merkur* and *Die Tat* took part in the discussion. The only major newspapers that did not were the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the *Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, and the *Deutsche Allgemeine Sonntagsblatt*. We have already mentioned one reason for this difference: the strategy of the Springer Press gave rise to the critical report in *Der Spiegel* (16 June 1969), whose promotional effect was very likely much greater than the lukewarm review the *Spiegel* gave *Das Netz* on July 7. Editors of newspapers representing a different viewpoint may have felt compelled by this report to take a stand against the Habe euphoria that was being spread by the Springer organization. In fact, the first cool or adverse reviews of the book appeared after June 16. On June 20 the *Nordseezeitung* printed a decidedly negative review, and a few days later the reviewer in the *Saarbrücker Zeitung* (21/22 June 1969) expressed strong reservations about the new best-seller.

A second probable reason is the changed literary climate of the late 1960s. Given the influence of elitist-oriented literary theory in the 1950s, it was difficult to justify dealing with a so-called entertainment novel. But in the 1960's, novelists like Habe benefited from the literary revolution, which broke down the literary canon. Marcel Reich-Ranicki, for example, claimed, if belatedly, to be the discoverer of the popular novel. But in *Die Zeit* he was by no means the first to deal with this genre. The increasing interest of academic criticism in trivial literature, itself

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\(^{33}\)Glotz, *Buchkritik*, p. 191.
responding to aesthetic realignments during the sixties, definitely affected contemporary literary criticism. In each period, the state of academic discussion was reflected in the book-review section of the newspapers by the delay that arises (as would be expected) in the transition from one realm of communication to another. Whereas Robert Neumann in his series of articles in Die Zeit entitled “Kitsch as Kitsch can” (21 September–5 October 1962) used the concept of “kitsch” without questioning it, basing his work on Walther Killy and Walter Nutz, Wolfgang Rieger in 1970 based his discussion of Simmel’s novels on a critique of ideology.34 Toward the end of the sixties the demand that the literature consumed by the broad public be given critical attention had not yet been generally accepted; nevertheless, critics were more open to the idea.

A graph of the number of reviews per month does not show Habe’s novel to have been treated in a way markedly different from other best-sellers. Das Netz did, however, remain an item of discussion somewhat longer than usual, thanks in part to the repeated attention it received in the Springer press. After its initial success in May, it showed a dropoff in the dog days of summer; then came its period of most intensive reviewing in October. After that the interest curve fell slowly; in the spring of 1970 there appeared only occasional short critiques in provincial newspapers. After a year the book’s publicity was exhausted. This closely follows the pattern of such best-selling novels. What is not evident from an analysis of press attention is the lucrative business which the publisher reaps long after the public has turned to other subjects. The special book-club editions go unnoticed by critics even though by virtue of these editions the work is just entering its phase of widest distribution.

One statistic, noteworthy if compared to the novels of Kirst or Simmel, is the number of extensive reviews—three to six columns long. In this aspect Habe compares favorably to successful authors from the Gruppe 47. Uwe Johnson’s Zwei Ansichten (Two Views), for instance, received 72 reviews and discussions, 34 of which can be classified as extensive articles (150 cm² or more), 15 as short critiques, and 19 as reviews of average length (50–150

According to the material available to me, Habe's *Das Netz* was accorded 33 extensive analyses, 25 short critiques, and 24 average-length reviews, whereas Kirst's *Fabrik der Offiziere* received only 14 extensive reviews. Habe, then, had no ground for complaint about the amount of press coverage. His assertion that he was treated unfairly by the critics proves to be a myth. The numerous positive evaluations far outweigh the few negative reviews. The rejection by the literary elite which Habe anticipated never materialized. In *Die Welt*, Haas (perhaps under pressure) found nothing objectionable in the novel. In *Die Zeit*, Reich-Ranicki found fault with some aspects, but emphasized Habe's masterly craftsmanship. In *Christ und Welt* (5 December 1969), Giselher Wirsing wrote approvingly of the book's message, and *Der Spiegel*, from which one might have expected a scathing review after its June article, took a neutral stand. Only the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (26 July 1969) printed a strongly negative critique. Among the Swiss newspapers, *Die Tat* (25 April 1969) and *Der Bund* (6 June 1969) were on Habe's side, while the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* wrote a purely descriptive analysis. Overall, Johnson's *Zwei Ansichten* was no more favorably reviewed (*Das Netz* 59 percent positive, 26.6 percent neutral, 14.4 percent negative; *Zwei Ansichten* 66 percent positive, 19 percent neutral, 14 percent negative).

These perhaps surprising findings need, of course, to be analyzed more thoroughly; it is a question not of describing Habe's impact, but of exploring the conditions behind the phenomenon. What accounted for the wide agreement among critics? Was it the message that made the novel so attractive? Were the positive reviews evoked by the narrative style of the author? Or were nonaesthetic considerations within the institution of literary criticism of greater importance? It should be noted in this context that statistical studies reveal in general more positive than negative book reviews. Still, this does not fully explain the case of Habe's novel. Had *Das Netz* appeared two years earlier or two years later, the book probably would not have had the same success. The novel came at the right time—its theme was already filling the pages of the press. In other words, this was an instance of a "relevant media event." There was no need for a prestigious

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literary magazine to write about *Das Netz*. The connection between its fictional world and the reality experienced by the reader was so obvious, it seemed, that a specifically literary approach was not necessary—one could write about this book even in the local news section. This is apparent in the tenor of the reviews. The provocative social message forced the literary-aesthetic problematic into the background. This was, it seems, fully in accord with Habe's intentions.

This observation may appear at first glance rather odd, since Habe had chosen a narrative form that does not lend itself to the direct communication of a message. Since the narrator steps back completely behind his characters in *Das Netz*, we cannot examine the empirical reception of the novel without considering its structure. We must show how the reader necessarily becomes involved in the literary realization of the work, which becomes complete only through the reading process. By involvement we mean the acceptance or rejection of the role projected in the text, not individual reactions or reactions of specific groups, though the novel, of course, provoked these as well, as we will see in our analysis of the reviews.

The plot of this novel, 560 pages long in the original edition, can be summarized quickly. I intentionally quote the synopsis that appeared on the dust jacket, prepared by the publisher and presumably cleared with the author:

Call girl Hertha Enzian is murdered in Rome. A search for the killer? A search for success and fame. Eight people do business with death. The reporter, cynical in spite of his youth. The magazine publisher, who hides the murderer until he has written his memoirs. The publisher's son, a rebel with ambition. The attorney, who buys the life of the dead girl. The dead girl's father, who picks flowers from graves. The swinger from the Via Veneto, who turns sex into numbers. The chief of police, who wants one more big one before he retires. And finally the murderer, a broken-down writer who uses his reprieve in his own way. Aurelio Morelli is a rapist and killer who believes that fish, not humans, are the only creatures with ethics. Like all other figures in the novel, he seeks to justify the unjustifiable. His excuse is the "youth of today"—they must be done away with; older people are threatened and cannot begin this task soon enough. Aurelio thinks he has done his part for the "revolution of age."
Obviously this summary contains hints for interpretation and evaluation which are designed to prod the potential reader into purchasing the book. The fictionalized events seem to offer material for a detective story—the murder, the search for the killer, the finding of clues, the relentless pursuit by the police chief, and so on. But Habe reverses the pattern of the detective novel. The discovery of the murderer takes place not at the end of the story but in the first chapter. The search for the killer is of secondary importance. In its place, in a modern-day transformation of the model, stands a commercial exploitation of past events. The action in the present stretches between the accidental discovery of the murderer in the autumn of 1967 and the publication of the Enzian story—that is, the confession of the murderer—in the Christmas edition of Vanetti's magazine *Quest'Ora*. This action in the present is broadened by the thoughts and comments of the characters, in which they justify their actions. There is only one connection between these various experiences and reflections of the figures, namely that each of them has something to do with the death of Hertha Enzian. The traditional plot, which carefully integrates all elements, has been broken into fragments. It is no accident that this is reminiscent of the way the *nouveau roman* transformed the model of the detective story and used it as a new form of fictional narrative which no longer provides the reader with an answer, but instead poses a question. Conceived as antinovels, the works of Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet contradict conventional preconceptions. Habe was known from his earlier novels as a traditional storyteller who remained in control of his narrative. In *Das Netz*, he applied for the first time the formal methods of the modern experimental novel. The action is no longer entrusted to an auctorial narrator. The total picture is assembled through eight different first-person accounts; they overlap one another, but also to some extent contradict one another in their interpretations of the events. The reader must immediately assume the task of comparing the various narrative strands, each offered in segments, and examining them for accuracy. We seem to have a situation analogous to the modern novel whose text does not offer the reader a definite meaning but forces the reader to participate in the search for this signification. This narrative method is based on the idea that reality cannot be recreated
mimetically, nor can it be depicted as an objective unity. We do not need to delve into the historical reasons for these premises here; suffice it to say that this concept is decisive for the poetics of the novel of the modern, postrealistic era. It is important, however, to examine the changed relationship between the textual structure and the reader which resulted from the modern poetics of the novel. Klaus Netzer noted in regard to the *nouveau roman*, “The old habits of the reader must be broken, and the reader must make a considerable effort in order to come to a new concept of literature which is at the same time both epic and didactic.”\(^\text{36}\) But how can this exertion be demanded of a broad public with well-established reading expectations? Must not the modern narrative method frighten away the very readers whom Habe could previously count on, those who seek a tightly knit, suspenseful story filled with themes of current relevance?

The popularity of the novel, evidenced by its sales of over three hundred thousand copies, proves that Habe's plan worked, that one can tell a story in a “modern” way and still reach a wide readership. His readers obviously withstood the shock created by the new form. But now comes the second question: How deep was this shock; how much adjustment did it actually require for the reader to adapt to the structure of the novel? Habe places unaccustomed demands on his readers in *Das Netz*, but at the same time he carefully provides aids within the text to help orient the uncertain reader. For instance, the sudden beginning of the first first-person report—Emilio Bossi's account of his conversation with the publisher Vanetti—is quickly explained by Bossi's description of the first meeting with Morelli, during which the contract for the murderer's memoirs is signed. In case the reader is still confused after this first segment, the immediately following passage by Morelli helps to explain the background and origin of the action. If it is true that one of the assumptions of the modern novel is that reality can no longer be depicted by traditional epic narration, and if therefore the expectation of the reader is soon confused by modern texts which no longer offer a definite meaning, we can only conclude that in Habe's novel the form has been divorced from its original function. For the author does not attempt a disorientation of the

\(^{36}\text{Klaus Netzer, Der Leser des Nouveau Roman (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), p. 21.}\)
reader in its deeper sense. To be sure, the division of the action into numerous perspectives requires a greater degree of participation on the part of the reader, who must compare the versions offered and decide which interpretation to accept. But the “reality” of the world of the narrative is never seriously placed in doubt.

The framework of the action could be put together piece by piece, for Habe made sure that all the elements could be found somewhere in the puzzle. He uses stereotypical characters—the careful, legalistic attorney, the millionaire’s son vainly fighting the establishment, to name two. Each presents his actions and viewpoints, and the reader is able to choose from among them. These possibilities for identification with a character are, however, set up in such a way that the revolutionary young Vanetti is revealed as an opportunist as soon as the leadership of the firm is handed over to him, and the ambitious lawyer Zempach summoned his courage too late to inform the police about the murderer. These types are morally negative, and the reader is not inclined to identify with them. Habe has openly conceded the weaknesses of this one-dimensional characterization. In the case of the three older male figures—the writer Morelli, the police chief Canonica, and the publisher Vanetti—he uses a more differentiated method. These men are so nearly alike in their attitudes that the value judgments anticipated by the reader seem to be thrown into question. This shocking similarity is, however, a superficial one; it exists on the level of opinions behind which the initiated reader can recognize the author himself. In this way Aurelio Morelli, the washed-up, forgotten novelist, can speak for Habe with his commentary on the problem of narration:

The writer is a vigilant god whom nothing surprises. By no means does he experience the action he describes, though younger writers would have us believe this. In looking back, rather, he reports, summarizes, and comments on things that have long ago taken place before his omnipresent eyes. The architect, a lesser artist, builds from the bottom up, pedantically placing each stone on the next; but the writer, in a divine way, builds from the top down—from a roof hovering in the air he sets his stones row by row. [pp. 154 f.]

Habe is far less removed from these creative artists, the alter
deus of Shaftesbury and Herder, than he admits. He too guides
the events according to a prepared plan and knows how to con-
struct a realistic fictional world. The confusion introduced by his
technique and the absence of a narrator touches the surface of
the novel, but not its deep structure. Habe's first-person voices,
his witnesses, give the reader the impression of being directly
addressed. Like the epistolary novel of the eighteenth century,
which also utilized this device of interruption through multiple
perspectives, the various first-person personae carry on an inti-
mate conversation with the reader, who can then feel empathy
with the figures. A number of reviews made note of this
effect—the reader gains the impression of dealing with people
very much like those he might meet in real life. Now perhaps we
might answer the question of how Habe could borrow so much
of the form of the modern novel without losing his readers.
Devices that served to disrupt the illusion of realism in the
nouveau roman, as well as in other examples of the modern novel,
are used by Habe to contribute to the semblance of reality.
There arises finally before the reader's eyes a homogeneous
entity, no longer a world of unbroken ideals but an intact picture
of reality with which the average reader is familiar.

Using two examples, I would like to demonstrate how the
criticism verbalized the horizon of expectation of the reading
public. I shall quote Hans Helmut Kirst, author of successful
war novels, whose review appeared in the St. Galler Tagblatt on
May 18, 1969, and the critic Hermann Lewy, who published his
It is not surprising, we might note, that Kirst, who had often
been praised by Habe, returned the favor with a positive review.
Lavishing superlatives, he calls the book "the most interesting,
most amusing, and most daring book that Habe has ever pro-
duced," and adds apodictically, "And there is probably no one
else in the German-speaking world who could bring off anything
like it." Habe is celebrated as a deeply perceptive critic of society
who is at the same time a brilliant master of the literary craft. For
Kirst it is not a question whether Habe has correctly analyzed
social reality: "This is a novel that probes a society in which only
such a novel could appear probable." The intent never seems
problematic, so that Kirst is able to say, "It is soon perfectly clear
what Habe is after this time: . . . what primarily interests him, the
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author, is this: What profits can be made from murderers and their victims?” That summarizes, for Kirst, the core of the novel. Even Hans Habe had not considered the matter to be so simple; with the Enzian case he intended to deal with today’s youth, Marxism, the teachings of Freud, and the commercialization of the mass media, among other things.

Lewy takes a broader view of the novel’s message. Like Kirst, he distinguishes between the events of the novel and its theme: “For Habe, the murder itself is merely an excuse to castigate a society that pretends to be more than it really is, to pillory the machinations... which have taken root in certain illustrated magazines and the boulevard press.” Concerning the meaning of the book, he writes, “But this latest book also shows the author’s bitterness, his dissatisfaction with the development of mankind, which is certainly making progress in technical and scientific fields, but by no means in the spiritual realm—indeed, it seems to be moving backward.” Lewy completes this identification with the ideological message of the novel (seen, by the way, in the light of Habe’s own commentaries) with praise for the author’s narrative art: “Habe has depicted men as they actually live in our society, characters of flesh and blood, replete with the faults evident in a self-indulgent society where might is more important than right.” This praise of Habe’s realism—realism in which society, unconditionally and in toto, fits neatly into the epic method, in which reality is dissolved into independently existing figures and events—legitimates at the same time the implied social criticism. It presupposes the success of the writing style (the plausibility of the contexts and the credibility of the figures) in order to prove the accuracy of the message. For a story told in such a way that it really could have happened carries the measure of its truth within itself. Neither Kirst nor Lewy asks whether contemporary reality actually corresponds to its depiction in Das Netz, nor do they ask how this reality might have been fictionally confronted.

Kirst’s and Lewy’s reviews are representative of that group of critics who more or less agree with Habe’s evaluation of the

37 Even Willy Haas, who speaks of a “moral portrait” of an entire epoch (Die Welt, 22 May 1969), and Kurt Riess, who calls the novel a “comédie humaine” (Tat, 25 April 1969), hold fast to this pattern of interpretation. Riess’s reference to Balzac and Dickens makes the poetological context clear historically as well.
social and cultural situation and thus view the novel as a reflection of reality. Therefore they see no serious difficulties in conveying their criticism. The reviewer and the reading public comprise an unquestioned unity. Criticism could assume, however, both the task and the opportunity of explaining to the reader how the novelist fictionalizes social criticism. The beginnings of such a confrontation can be found in the reviews of three local newspapers. Their analyses of Habe’s ideology proceed from a critique of form. The three reviewers set high literary standards; they take Habe’s attempt at “modern” writing seriously and come to the conclusion that the novel falls short of the goal it set for itself. In the *Bonner Generalanzeiger* (19 September 1969), Paul Hubrich points out the discrepancy between the narrative mode and the theme: “And it is precisely at this point that Habe, it seems to me, is resting on a huge poetological error—blending techniques and other such formalism are legitimate in the modern novel only when they necessarily emerge from the theme itself, unnoticed by the reader.”

Judged by the standards of the modern novel, *Das Netz* remains a mediocre product, a “cheap jumble of platitudes,” making any serious consideration of its message superfluous. The critics for the *Wolfenbütteler Zeitung* (22 October 1969) and the *Berlin Telegraf* also explicitly connect the twisted social criticism with the work’s formal deficiencies, though they do not document this connection in detail. They fail to go beyond general formulations or such individual observations as those by Heino Eggers in the *Telegraf* (18 January 1970): “Habe loses all touch with reality when he attempts a critique of our age, in depicting, for instance, a student demonstration. He saves himself with modernisms that do not fit him at all. It is apparent that his experience with the youth rebellion has come from his summer house in Ascona, not from the street.”

The general reader, who is not so familiar with the aesthetic standards of the modern novel, may have trouble seeing why this failure of form must have a negative effect on the message, the social criticism. But if the literary discussion is carried on without regard for the competence of the public, the discussion risks being confined to experts, with no chance for the broad public, namely Habe’s readers, to participate. At that point one reaches the esoteric formalism censured by Peter Glotz in Ger-
man literary criticism. Hans-Joachim Broihan's review in the *Wolfenbütteler Zeitung* offers a good example of this tendency. His introductory sentences, which obviously refer critically to Haas' review, distinguish theme and content from poetic relevance: "This new book by Hans Habe has been called a portrait of our time and a passionate criticism of society. I do not take issue with that. We need to ask, however, whether a novel can be judged merely according to its intent, or whether we must consider the more stringent criteria of what makes a good novel."

This opening suggests that the author's intention of social criticism is unimportant to the value of the novel. But that is not Broihan's view: he establishes the discrepancy between the message of cultural criticism and the narrative mode but does not explain its cause to the reader, for he considers the poetic norm of the modern novel to be an absolute. The book's success with the general readership, proved by the best-seller lists, is ignored or, as in the review in the *Bonner Generalanzeiger*, dismissed as the "fame of mediocrity." Here are three instances of rigorous criticism of both form and content which proceeds from the aesthetic premises of the experimental novel and does not take into consideration that these premises are not self-evident to the average reader. It fails to show the reader how Habe's narrative strategy is actually designed to take away the reader's freedom of choice, despite the seemingly wide selection of characters and views offered. Habe takes care to ensure that the reader does not misread the message. Despite the use of modern narrative techniques, the intellectual scope is limited to a mere cataloguing of clichés. Habe's novel (setting aside the author's own views) is not directed toward mature, independent readers, but toward those whose perception is molded by the information industry. It offers a collection of stereotypes corresponding precisely to the mass media's codified demand for "true-to-life" figures. "What is expected to happen does happen, thus assuring the readers that they belong to a world in which, no matter how perverse and decadent it may be, everything functions in an orderly fashion (although in reality only clichés function)," wrote Peter W. Jansen in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (26 July 1969). The reader is offered clichés that help soothe the worries of the 1969 public: "But the cliché world betrays its cosmopolitan figure. The millionaire's son, naturally a young protester (cliché), shaves..."
off his beard (cliché) when he has to assume control of the publishing firm after his father's heart attack (cliché)—the cliché expectation of society is fulfilled, the cliché hope that the extra-parliamentary opposition will become ‘reasonable’ as soon as it assumes responsibility.”

We see here the beginnings of the idea of a metacriticism to Habe’s social criticism—a metacriticism that does not restrict itself to pointing out shortcomings in the artistic form, but demonstrates that both the success and danger of Habe’s ideologized novel are predicated on its use of questionable artistic means. Yet Jansen, in the final analysis still a prisoner of the literary coterie, tosses Das Netz into the bin of trivial literature, as though by doing so he can overcome the danger it presents. A familiar matrix shines through: trivial literature presents a system of false values because its customers are the masses.

It is worth noting that among the more lengthy discussions, only two deal with the problematic theme of best-sellers and trivial literature, namely Reich-Ranicki’s review in Die Zeit (20 June 1969) and Peter Meier’s essay in Zurich’s Tagesanzeiger.38 Only twice are questions raised regarding the function of a novel like Das Netz in the literary world, and the proper evaluation of that function. Two typical positions are assumed by the reviewers (consciously or not), each reflecting certain attitudes which in fact appeared rather early in the history of literary criticism. Reich-Ranicki uses Habe’s novel to initiate a cultivated discussion with the readers of Die Zeit concerning the uses and the possibilities of literature as entertainment. His defense of entertainment novels is directed not toward those who read them but toward those who scorn them, who reject the genre as being alien to art. He appeals to a reading public that thinks in terms of hierarchical norms and in accordance with its self-established boundaries excludes any Habe novel from the world of true literature. Thus the prefatory remark: “It is sad but true: Anyone who praises a popular novel (Unterhaltungsroman) in Germany supplies easy ammunition to his opponents. For no matter how one twists and turns the issue, an entertainment novel remains a kind of half-breed, a more or less questionable item,

always easy to attack. But it is also true that one can never quite get at it with strictly literary criteria.” Despite this statement, Reich-Ranicki uses extraliterary criteria only to a minor extent, noting that an author of best-sellers must necessarily strike a compromise between what is desirable aesthetically and what is desired by the public. This plea for a higher class of popular novel treats the reading needs of the broad public as well-known fact which needs no further investigation. For Reich-Ranicki a writer such as Habe fulfills an important function by offering a product on the middle ground between “high” literature and trash, engaging in the business of entertainment in a manner that is intelligent and not literarily objectionable. To belabor the title metaphor (“Souls off the Rack”): Habe provides not a custom-made suit but a solid, ready-made garment for mass consumption. The norms of high literature, to summarize Reich-Ranicki’s position, are suspended on this middle level. Or better: they are applied less strictly. Literature operates on many levels, and it is unfair to demand that every novel meet the stringent criteria of belles-lettres. We should not begrudge the average readers their need for entertainment. It is understood, of course, that the genre cannot be included in the canon of serious literature. Nevertheless, entertainment novels perform a sociopsychological service that should not be underestimated—by verbalizing current issues, they help relieve the pressure of them.

If we assume this to be Reich-Ranicki’s position, a number of questions arise: Why must works that obviously find their readership without the mediation of literary criticism even be reviewed? What good is second-class praise? Reich-Ranicki’s review, aimed at an educated public familiar with the standards of contemporary high literature, ends in a pronouncement of literary status. Habe is held to be a master within a certain class of literature. This positive evaluation would turn into rigorous belittlement if Reich-Ranicki assumed its author to be a Böll or a Johnson.39 His review does not eliminate literary classification; it

39When Reich-Ranicki analyzes Böll’s Ansichten eines Clowns, for example, this kindness is no longer in evidence. Since the critic considers this author to belong to the circle of high literature, he formulates his evaluations sharply. In discussing Habe’s novel, he barely touched on its myopic, clichéd criticism of society, but this aspect is brought fully to bear against Böll’s work. Böll failed, according to Reich-Ranicki, on two levels. First, the object of his social criticism is too limited.
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confirms it. That holds true for the critic and for his readers as well, since the article is directed toward a group for whom Habe's novels probably do not represent a serious topic of conversation. The critic comes to an understanding with his audience here: it is permissible for other, less competent groups of readers to occupy themselves with more refined sorts of entertaining literature. And if one should occasionally read a bestseller oneself, it is nothing to be ashamed of.

For Meier, unlike Reich-Ranicki, the question whether Habe's *Das Netz* is worth reading is not one of taste. Meier demonstrated something that Reich-Ranicki had only asserted abstractly: the impossibility of examining the novel fully through literary exegesis. The work must be seen in connection with Habe's newspaper articles and social criticism. Actually, Meier is merely taking Habe at his word—Habe never denied that the novel contained moral instruction for the middle and older generations. To that extent the literary discussion is also a political and ideological one. The coincidence of the author's political views and the thrust of the novel is the key to Meier's criticism. His pronouncements on Habe's writing capabilities, which are never disputed, are therefore more severe and more negative than those of Reich-Ranicki. He uses Habe's admitted technical craftsmanship as evidence against him and calls the author's use of shifting perspectives a tactic of concealment: "This procedure has several advantages. First, it achieves (nearly) authentic effects. Second, it provides color and the lifelike quality which novels of this genre are careful to cultivate. And third, it supplies its inventor with a (nearly) perfect alibi—what is spoken are not his own views, prejudices, sentiments, and clichéd ideas, but must be seen and understood from the perspective of the *dramatis personae*; thus they cannot be attacked."

This narrative technique, Meier concludes, appears to offer the reader a freedom that does not really exist. The views offered in the novel as those of a psychopathic writer, thus easy for the reader to reject, can be read also, in a milder form of course, in Habe's journalistic essays. The factual agreement cannot be

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Second, his methods of presentation are no longer appropriate, given the degree of complexity of modern social forms. Cf. Reich-Ranicki, *Literatur der kleinen Schritte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), pp. 15-21.
doubted. Habe himself accentuated these ideas in various ways in his interviews. But there is no ready explanation for why an opinion from the mouth of a psychopath in a novel should be more influential or more portentous than the directly stated views of Hans Habe the publicist. Meier at least does not stringently pursue this connection, but offers a correct conclusion without having previously developed the corresponding premises. His final judgment is stated thus: "Das Netz is a dangerous book precisely because it does not openly announce its message... but propagates in a cleverly disguised form a mentality that stirs dimly felt emotions in a wide reading public; it does not reduce or even critically illuminate the prejudices of the masses—rather, it corroborates them."

There is a gap here between the evidence and the conclusion. It is not clearly demonstrated why the reader is manipulated by Habe’s use of shifting perspectives. In Meier’s review the literary elements and the critique of ideology are not sufficiently interwoven. Problems of literary technique are analyzed in such a cursory fashion that it is difficult for a reader unschooled in theory, who might well find Das Netz exciting reading, to understand where the danger of this book lies. It is probably no accident that Meier ascribes prejudices and “dimly felt emotions” to the broad public. No less than Reich-Ranicki, he directs his remarks to a group of readers for whom this novel is, at best, an example of the discredited best-seller. If one asks, therefore, what the purpose of this criticism is, the answer is that it affirms the standpoint of the critical intelligentsia—that is, a representative of this group has said what needs to be said regarding such a book as this. But Meier’s well-founded warning does not reach the readers for whom it would be most significant, since these readers are written off as the “masses.”

The restriction to a single example makes generalizing from the results problematic. Still, some hypotheses can be formulated, to be tested through an examination of comparable material, namely reviews of Willi Heinrich’s novel Geometrie einer Ehe (Geometry of a Marriage, 1967) and Siegfried Lenz’s Deutschstunde (The German Lesson, 1968). How does the critical establishment respond to the best-seller? Critics for the most part merely record best-sellers without reflecting on the existing mechanisms of production and consumption. But in the past few
years a change has taken place in the cultural editorial staffs of some national newspapers. Some are beginning to realize that the best-seller is not merely a book that sells a great many copies. A certain interest in production methods and forms of distribution is gradually becoming evident, although local newspapers in general still tend to act as though the copy of the book sent to the editor simply fell from heaven. Symptomatic of this change in attitude is the extensive article by Dieter Kraeter in the Rheinische Merkur (19 February 1970) entitled “Alles über einen Bestseller: Der unaufhaltsame Aufstieg des Siegfried Lenz” (“Everything You Wanted to Know about a Best-Seller: The Irresistible Rise of Siegfried Lenz”). It deals with the economic side of Lenz’s novelistic success, based upon publishing data. In addition, the same edition of this newspaper offers a second review of Lenz’s Deutschstunde, in which Heinz Beckmann explores the question of why precisely this novel, which seems to contain so few ingredients of the standard successful novel, broke through the crucial one-hundred-thousand-copy barrier so quickly.

Signs of a new level of reflection in literary criticism can be observed. The literary elite’s mistrust of the best-seller as a typical product of despised mass culture has not yet disappeared, but occasionally one finds a more carefully weighed, self-critical posture. Nevertheless, the well-worn dichotomy of serious literature and popular literature has by no means lost its hold. One approaches a novel by Lenz differently than a novel by Heinrich. This fact has less to do with the work in question than with common stereotypes. Although reviewers tended to accept Lenz’s Deutschstunde a priori as a work of high standards and applied aesthetic as well as ideological criteria, there was an inclination (especially in the national press) to treat Heinrich with a certain kindly condescension. These differences are noticeable primarily in the neutral and negative reviews; the positive reviews show far more agreement in their conception and articulation. The qualities praised in Lenz were emphasized in praise of Habe and Heinrich as well. This tendency can be demonstrated in three examples from the local press. In the first case, the book is lauded as follows: “This is without doubt the author’s masterpiece. A book such as this contains a tremendous energy. Behind the joy of narration lies a moral impetus. The author has created
a distressingly narrow world of prejudices and stubbornness. With a gripping, powerful language and epic cleverness he paints a portrait of his era" (Darmstädter Zeitung, 14 August 1971, on Deutschstunde). In the second instance, one reads: "This book can be read simply as a suspenseful tale about people of our time. But it can also be seen as a challenge to look one’s own life, including its more or less limited potentialities, soberly and without illusions right in the eye" (Esslinger Zeitung, 19 August 1968, on Geometrie einer Ehe). The third example: "A suspenseful and provocative book appeared which not only describes an exciting case, just as it happens a thousand times, but also forces the reader to think about the myriad attitudes and problems in today's society" (Flensburger Tagblatt, 15 November 1969, on Das Netz). The structure of each work disappears behind handy formulas that can be applied to many cases. We find here the platitudes spread by the advertising campaigns of the publishing houses, which recur later on in the program circulars of book clubs. The negative reviews and those which express reservations are more illuminating, for they reflect the typical positions more clearly.

Three patterns of criticism can be discerned—aesthetic discrimination, the suspension of strict aesthetic norms, and criticism of ideology. Aesthetic disqualification depends on the criteria (usually not expressly formulated) of a literary theory grounded in the notion of autonomy. Critics choosing this approach believe that the worthlessness or mediocrity of certain successful products on the literary market, whether called best-sellers or trivial novels, can be exposed through an analysis of the text. The discussion is supplemented by referring to other works that are firmly installed in the canon of great art. The question of why the work under examination became a best-seller poses no problem. The critic readily admits that the mass public has poor taste. His or her review is directed not toward the masses, but toward the “in” group, which feels an allegiance to the same norms. This is a pronouncedly literary-aesthetic discussion which intentionally stays away from extraliterary factors of influence. In the second group such rigidity relaxes into mild condescension, for the concept of a unified artistic literature has been loosened somewhat: popular literature follows its own laws, not primarily dictated by aesthetic considerations, and so should
not be judged by rigid aesthetic standards. A reviewer of Heinrich's *Geometrie einer Ehe* in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (16–17 September 1967) states: “Heinrich occupies something of a middle ground between the novels of Walser and Max Frisch on the one hand and, on the other, the platitudes of women's magazines.” This middle status diminishes the criticism to an ironic commentary: “But no matter how much sex goes on, the result of the exercises is meager—literarily, psychologically, even medicinally. More important for the action, which moves along at a lively pace, is an aspect Heinrich has chosen to explore extensively—the power of income. Where money is the weapon, Heinrich is a knowledgeable war correspondent.” Jürgen P. Wallmann shows a similar friendly but ironic distance toward Lenz’s *Deutschstunde* in the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* (8 December 1968). “The book will get along well,” he notes as an introduction. “And that is nothing to complain about. For even those who take a critical stance toward this sort of novel, which is caught in the tradition of realistic narrative, will have to admit that Lenz understands his craft and reflects, in a rather accomplished manner, a laudable attitude.” This liberal approach of live-and-let-live which seems not to insist on the application of rigorous standards to a notable, successful novel proves on closer examination, however, to be by no means a neutral evaluation. A popular novel, even when its author has good intentions, may effect a suspension of aesthetic norms, but not the abandonment of them. Aesthetic disqualification may be shown out the front door, but it makes its way in again through the rear, and not because the private morality of the critic is two-faced and disputable, but because the hierarchy of the literary canon is merely differentiated. The formula for this conditionally praiseworthy middle class is talented craftsmanship, borne by a decent viewpoint, usable as family reading matter.

This lack of commitment does not apply to the third position—the method that exposes the ideological bias of a work. It is not content with the formula “good attitude and solid handiwork,” which leaves the potential effect of the text untouched. Nor does it accept the separation of theme and presentation, for the praise of good intentions can obscure the possibility of good intentions being converted into their opposite by the textual
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presentation. With the suspension of aesthetic criteria, concessions are made to the broad public to facilitate its access to literature, but the approach using criticism of ideology defines this public as a mass of consumers who do not perceive the true implications of the work. These critics should therefore not be indifferent about what audience is reached by their reviews. Nonetheless, their interest in communicating with the masses is not very pronounced. The group standpoint tends to predominate. Characteristically, the reviewer in the journal konkret (30 December 1968) uses the plural form in his polemic against the harmless nature of Lenz's social criticism: "After 23 years we have had enough of this sort of culinary, officious, outdated, internalized Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past), which is surely a source of bourgeois reading pleasure even for old Nazis." The critic unmistakably distinguishes his readership from that of Lenz. There is no thought of speaking to the general public. Similar tendencies exist in national newspapers. For example, there are the critical reviews of Deutschstunde by Hans-Albert Walter in the Süddeutsche Zeitung (14 November 1968) and by Peter W. Jansen in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (17 September 1968). Both deal extensively with the content and theme of the novel, with the narrative situation and the constellation of the figures. Both are critical of the same point—the overburdening of the youthful narrator with the task of producing a fictional world. For Walter and Jansen this is not merely a psychological flaw; they see in it the reason why Lenz did not do justice to his theme (German history under Hitler), why good sentiments did not lead to a good novel. Their doubts are directed toward the attempt to portray epically, using only a few characters, the history of the Third Reich. Walter writes: "The central injustice of the Third Reich is to be represented through peripheral events. So the dehumanized parents, the Jepsens, have to assume the form of nearly mythical monsters, while the painter Nansen swells into a monument to undaunted artistic freedom. Evil and full of insidious intrigues on the one hand, noble and full of defiant simplicity on the other—O Germany, if only you could be grasped so easily!"

Like Jansen, Walter endeavors to show how the narrative method selected by Lenz abbreviated the theme and reduced the
constellation of characters to clichés inadequate for a complex reality. They object to this attempt to reconstruct fictionally the Fascist era, stating that the author did not “confront” the past, but merely transferred it to the personal, individual realm, thereby making it seem harmless. The position taken by Walter and Jansen leads to an unequivocal judgment; it makes no concessions to the reading public. The assertions of Jansen and Walter are absolute and specific, and they overlook, to be sure, the communicative aspect. They leave unexplored the connection between the literary characteristics of the novel and its unusual success, unanticipated even by its publisher.

If this case is to go beyond description and categorization, it must ask what conclusions can be drawn from this analysis for literary criticism. What should the task of current criticism be in regard to the phenomenon of the best-seller? To prevent expectations from becoming too exaggerated, it should be noted in advance that while such considerations do not alter the factors presently affecting book reviewing in West Germany, they may help to influence the consciousness of critics.

Professional literary criticism has not yet sufficiently realized that intrinsic literary discussion is inappropriate in dealing with best-sellers, because problems of economics and the sociology of the reading public are not merely peripheral to the concept of trivial literature. Since mass reception was frequently turned into an index of aesthetic triviality, critical attention was restricted to those authors and works which were discriminated against, for other reasons, in their own right. And the success of those authors who belong to the avant-garde (or at least are considered so) remained unexplored. Thus there are supposedly two types of best-sellers—those able to attract a sizable readership on the basis of their literary status, and those which as a result of adapting to the readers’ taste are able to captivate and dupe the masses. Symptomatic of this schizophrenia (which is by no means the prerogative of literary snobs) are Meier’s introductory remarks to his analysis of Habe and Willi Heinrich: “Not every successful, money-making book is inferior in a literary sense; there are also legitimate best-sellers. For example, when a writer of proven talent publishes a new work—every new book by Grass, Böll, Frisch, or Martin Walser (to name just a few
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German speaking authors) is bound to grace the best-seller lists for a time."\(^{40}\)

This position is poorly thought out. It presumes that these books become best-sellers on their own and that only bad novels ("trivial" novels) are manipulated through advertising campaigns, as though Grass's and Böll's publishers were less informed about the art of sales promotion. It is highly questionable to assume that recognized authors are not liable for their sales successes, while the others are relegated to second-class status precisely because of this success. If the best-seller is equated with the so-called trivial novel, the field of investigation is too quickly restricted to the segment of literary production which prominent critics do not take seriously even today.

The dependence of literary criticism on the theory of the trivial novel can be proven paradigmatically. Professional critics have loyally followed the academic discussion on the nature and function of trivial literature. The shift in attitude can be shown clearly by examining two essays that appeared in Die Zeit. The title of Neumann's 1962 essay, "Kitsch as Kitsch can,"\(^ {41}\) anticipates the beginning of the movement, namely the influence of the kitsch debate within literary scholarship in the fifties and early sixties. Neumann expressly based his statements on Killy's study of kitsch and the work of Walter Nutz on the serialized novel for lending libraries.\(^ {42}\) With his orientation toward cultural criticism, Neumann makes the Industrial Revolution responsible for an immature public searching for false images. The trivial novel's capacity to adapt to the varying conditions of the time is rooted in its amalgamation of fairy-tale structure and quasi-realistic accoutrements—the reader is shown a fantasy but is given the impression of seeing the true problems of real life. Kitsch as the fulfillment of the half-conscious wishes of a repressed readership—this summarizes Neumann's brilliantly written essay. In essence he offers an evaluation of taste supplemented by arguments from the sociology of the reading public. His examination of the programmed magazine novel is

\(^{40}\) *Tagesanzeiger*, 13 December 1969.

\(^{41}\) 21 and 28 September, 5 October 1962.

friendly and obliging; he calmly notes the manipulation of the public. The questions raised by Neumann in regard to future studies of the trivial novel have very little to do with the consumers of the genre. This rhetorical gesture, which speaks in a friendly, patronizing tone about both the trivial novel and its public, can also be found as late as 1970 in Wolfgang Rieger’s investigation of the novels of Johannes Mario Simmel. Other constants can be identified in this scholarly debate—a reprise of Nutz’s argument that trivial literature is totally adapted literature, and a reference to the pseudo-realistic nature of trivial novels. Neumann had maintained that in the trivial novel, contemporary reality serves solely as an interchangeable background for stereotyped courses of action. Rieger’s critical analysis of the patterns of action and character structures in Simmel’s novels is more precise. Simmel’s contemporary pseudo-reality, claims Rieger, is an invitation to dream. The readers are privy to the secrets of the mighty; they see the heroes of the novel with whom they identify suffer yet triumph in their suffering. Thus in the mind of the reader the world returns to order. Should one not ask how the reader, having closed the cover on Simmel’s or Habe’s novel, then engages in discussion, judges, chooses, or even thinks about the news on television?

Neumann suggested in 1962 that an academic institute be established to deal with kitsch and trivial literature. It appears to me that Rieger’s critique is still directed toward the members of that select group. The broad public is treated as an object—it is analyzed as to why it has such poor taste and why it so readily allows itself to be deceived. The critics have become prisoners of their theories and concepts, even if, like Reich-Ranicki, they occasionally make fun of the scientific veneer of essays on the topic of trivial literature. No one seems called upon to explain to Simmel’s and Heinrich’s audience how they can become more critical readers.

It is worth thinking about the reasons for this failure. Helmut Kreuzer touched on some of the causes in his critical report on the state of research. The inclusion of so-called trivial literature into literary research was poorly thought out, for the critics

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43See above, n. 34.
44See above, n. 2.
unwittingly operated with categories that previously had served as an aesthetic evaluation of specific types of literature. Kreuzer is correct in pointing out that this attitude, no matter how progressive it might claim to be, ultimately affirms the orthodox position. Applied to the situation of literary reviewing, this means that it makes no real difference whether a novel by Habe, Simmel, or Lenz is aesthetically rejected or, within the context of a three-tiered model, is praised as solid consumer goods; the literary premises, the critic’s evaluation, the reading public’s judgment remain untouched by it all. Even Reich-Ranicki’s praise merely attests to the traditional dichotomy between serious literature and something else. Professional critics, no less than literary scholars, are inclined to see popular and/or trivial literature as separate genres well suited to survey reviews with a bit of sociology of the reading public thrown in. Even the reviewers who employ arguments from the criticism of ideology are not always immune to this attitude insofar as they believe that trivial works are particularly suited to this methodology. Their standpoint is that what is not worth discussing aesthetically can still be discussed through criticism of ideology. The creation of an aesthetic canon, which is not rationally justified, dominates even those who would benefit from its dissolution. All in all, institutionalized book criticism is not yet in a position to break away from traditional, deeply entrenched modes of thought.

These modes of thought are powerful because in a process of accumulation they are continually presented to intellectuals in new variations. Literature classes at the Gymnasium, education at the university, the tradition of critical writing—all pointed to the separation between art and non-art. This dichotomy has been indispensable for the cultural elite’s conception of itself since the late eighteenth century. With the expansion and differentiation of the reading public and the accompanying increase in literary production (especially in the realm of the novel), there emerged a defensive posture within criticism. Its best representatives felt compelled to protest against the lowering of literary taste, even the misuse of literature. The majority of current arguments against trivial literature can be found in the reviews and theories of the German Classic and Romantic eras. Seen historically, the Classical-Romantic tradition of liter-
ary criticism has blocked critical and analytical study of the bestseller.\textsuperscript{45} Even well-meaning attempts to break out of the ghetto of literary criticism remain tied to the standard pattern of horizontal categorization. Thus Peter Glotz is correct in writing of a failure of professional criticism: “In this subjective sense, the books of Hans Habe, Willi Heinrich, Pearl S. Buck, Anne Golon, et al. are for millions of people far more ‘relevant’ than most products of high literature.”\textsuperscript{46}

Even if it is no longer true (as I was able to show in Habe’s case) that the press pays no attention to the works of these authors, it still has not generally reached the stage of a literary discussion useful to the broad public. Neither snobbish attacks nor affirmational plot synopses and uncritical admiration in local newspapers can achieve that goal.

One possible solution to the aesthetic restrictions of contemporary literary criticism might be to pass over its aesthetic value when discussing a best-seller and concentrate instead on its analysis of current issues. That is to say, rather than dwelling on literary quality (presumed to be low, at any rate), the critic could discuss the contemporary problems that led the reader to buy the book. In this sense, Wolfgang Langenbucher has urged that entertainment literature be evaluated according to its social function, and therefore that it be exempt from literary discussion per se.\textsuperscript{47} The discussion ought to concentrate on the impact of a best-seller on its readers. He uses an example to demonstrate the results of this change in attitude. Whereas professional criticism has either ignored Simmel’s novels or aesthetically condemned them, a reader-oriented criticism would pursue Simmel’s analysis of our age, would accentuate his political engagement, and would take into account his efforts to break down


\textsuperscript{46}Buchkritik, p. 84.

national prejudices.\(^{48}\) Let us set aside for the time being the question whether a critic should be satisfied with merely determining the author's intentions. More important here is that not even this attempt by Langenbucher and other scholars to lift aesthetic restrictions is able to overcome the dilemma of the theory of division according to quality. The justification of entertainment literature and its public represents a return (without admitting it) to Friedrich Schlegel's differentiation of poetry and nonpoetry. It attempts to save the lower realm by ignoring its literary characteristics in favor of its use value. According to the logic of narrative theory, this is obviously a false conclusion. The assumed or conceded lack of literary quality does not categorically remove the work from literature so that a discussion of current issues can replace the literary or aesthetic one. Langenbucher's suggestion, which has much in common with the didactic legitimation of the novel during the Enlightenment period, deprives critical discussion of a decisive dimension. We lose the possibility of critically examining the uniqueness of the fictional world. Because Langenbucher (among many others), following Classical-Romantic aesthetics, equates the literary uniqueness of a work with its aesthetic quality, he separates structure and use value and fails to note that formal qualities such as the mode of writing, the narrative attitude, and so on are important for the work's effect. That is the only explanation for the way he praises the democratic political engagement of Simmel's novels without even asking whether the textual elements acting upon the reader (characterization, use of action, the epic portrayal of contemporary reality, etc.) actually serve the function he ascribes to them.

Popular literary criticism should therefore not repress the literary aspect, but should replace the horizontal model of evaluation with a vertical one. It should stop initiating survey reviews of works discredited as trivial literature and confront the phenomenon of the best-seller in its entirety. It is noteworthy that Böll's novels, which are classed as serious literature, scarcely lag behind those of Habe or Simmel in sales. The book clubs live just as much from Böll, Grass, Lenz, and Frisch as from Anne Golon, Annemarie Selinko, and the steady sellers of Luis

\(^{48}\text{Langenbucher, "Unterhaltungsliteratur als Märchen und als Politik," in Koebner, ed., Tendenzen der deutschen Literatur seit 1945, pp. 341-343.}\)
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Trenker and Ludwig Ganghofer. The question of which groups within the reading public turn a work of those authors into a best-seller has yet to be investigated. Given the imponderable size of the modern book market and the high degree of differentiation among reading groups, the usual (pejorative) reference to the mass reading public means little. It can only be seen as an expression of embarrassment. To what extent does the reading audience of Habe overlap with that of Lenz? Are Habe readers also Simmel readers? Do those who enjoy Lenz also reach for a novel by Peter Härtling or Peter Handke? Literary criticism's inability to answer these questions is less disconcerting than its apparent lack of interest. Most critics (with some notable exceptions) are satisfied with an aesthetic scheme of stratification which is not only alien to reality (in that it does not correspond to the reading habits of the audience) but actually hinders, with its inscrutable irrationality, the enlightenment of the reader.

The situation can be changed. The factors necessary for a more effective popular literary criticism can at least be outlined. The first of them would be for the feuilleton editors to gain a clear picture of the composition of their readership and the taste of those readers, in order to guarantee that their reviews are suited to the audience’s level of competence. The elevated formal-aesthetic critique of Habe’s Netz in the Wolfenbütteler Zeitung probably had little effect, for its readers were for the most part unacquainted with even the basic premises of the reviewer. A discussion needs to proceed from things familiar to the readers—other novels they have probably read, literary concepts that seem natural to them—not to confirm these expectations, but to illuminate them critically on the basis of the example given. The second precondition would be the destruction of the literary-aesthetic canon, which defensively perpetuates a dichotomy within both literature and the public. The opposition of art and non-art has social implications that are no less dangerous when they are unintentional. The critique of ideology includes approaches whose animosity toward the public jeopardizes their goal of an illuminating analysis. Certainly the literary canon should not be abolished so that in the future all books can be considered equally significant.49 Opening up the encrusted

49 In contrast see Helmut Kreuzer’s attempt to trace value differences (“aesthetic discrimination”) back to differences in taste. The differentiation between high
canon should not be used to justify a standpoint which the media industry has seized as a democratic banner—entertainment for everyone.

The third precondition would be a continuing concentration on literary-economic questions. So long as neither the critics nor members of the public are acquainted with the mechanisms of the literary market, there can hardly be any hope of understanding the phenomenon of the best-seller. This phenomenon cannot be studied through a hermeneutic analysis of the individual work. Such criticism can become exemplary only when it can explain the economic as well as the cultural-political context. It is inadequate, though currently chic, to produce occasional reports on the business of literature, such as the development of a best-seller business or the mergers of book clubs. It is far more important to educate the readership about the factors that determine the availability of books.

and trivial literature has, for Kreuzer, no basis in the matter itself; it is to be understood purely as an intersubjective agreement within a certain group of people sharing common tastes. His scientific interest is thus defined as a value-free investigation of the use of the concept in certain historical situations. “That a certain segment of literature, on the basis of historical conditions in addition to those related to the sociology of taste, becomes collectively canonized while another segment is flatly discriminated against; that a contemporary class or group of persons sharing common tastes develop a consensus regarding the literary boundary between these areas, and how they do so—these are phenomena of scientific interest” (p. 184). This theoretical attitude, which consciously excludes the practical aspect of the problem, is only partly helpful to the critic. It supplies a description of these taste groups and the demarcations of their tolerances, but it abandons critics when they must decide whether to respect an established canonization or disqualification. If in the case of trivial literature it were merely a question of taste, with certain groups of readers battling for leadership, there would be no set criterion for deciding the struggle. One could only state that a certain category of literature has been rejected by the dominant reading group; one could not establish whether this suppression had occurred with or without justification. An insight into the functioning of traditional patterns of thought and a consciousness of their historical relativity are without doubt a necessary precondition for a confrontation with the phenomenon of “trivial literature.” In addition, this first step must be complemented by a critical analysis of the reading situation implied by the structure of the text. As readers, critics cannot remove themselves from the appeal of the text without limiting the significance of that text. They cannot pretend merely to register its characteristics and their correlation to the expectation horizon of the readers to whom it is directed without thinking about the practical function of the text and deciding whether to support or reject it.