



Jason Dark: German Pulp Fiction Writer of Genius

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Abstract

This article introduces the English-language reader to the popular German horror-fiction author, Jason Dark, and argues for an academic engagement with that writer, who until now has received but scant critical attention. The paper contends that the sheer volume and quality of Dark's creative output merits further scholarly investigation.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ นำผู้อ่านมารู้จักกับ Jason Dark นักประพันธ์แนวสยองขวัญผู้มีชื่อเสียงชาวเยอรมัน พร้อมทั้งอภิปรายถึงความเกี่ยวข้องทางวิชาการกับนักประพันธ์ผู้นี้ ซึ่งจนถึงปัจจุบันยังไม่ได้รับการวิเคราะห์วิจารณ์มากเท่าที่ควร บทความนี้จะวิเคราะห์ให้เห็นว่าผลงานสร้างสรรค์ของ Dark ทั้งในเชิงคุณภาพและปริมาณนั้นมีคุณค่าต่อการศึกษาในเชิงวิชาการ

Introduction

It sometimes happens that a man of enormous creative talent may remain unsung and uncelebrated within the purlieu of academia simply because that man is a purveyor of popular fiction. If he is a writer of 'pulp fiction', his fate will likely prove all the more dismal.

Snobbishness is a trait which should be expunged from the DNA of any literary critic—especially when that critic stands before a literary phenomenon rarely met with in an entire century of literary output. Such a phenomenon is living and walking amongst us today in Germany, I would contend, and his name is Jason Dark.

Actually, 'Jason Dark' is his nom de plume. His real name is Helmut Rellergerd. But it is as 'Jason Dark' that he has achieved a high level of 'cult' notoriety in his native Germany, and to some extent beyond. Since 1973 until the present day (June 2010) he has been creating one horror-detective novelette per week, with the result that he has now composed approaching 2,000 'penny dreadfuls' or 'dime novels' of impressive quality, and has achieved sales of an extraordinary 260 million copies of his books (Godden, 2007:15). When one considers that most of his works run to 100-150 pages each, his fecundity can only be an object of boundless wonder. In fact, Jason Dark has become arguably the best-selling and most popular German writer (particularly amongst teenagers) in the history of German literature. This fact alone should warrant a review by academicians—and yet to date nothing substantial of this kind has been undertaken.

Furthermore, the worrying decline in reading amongst teenagers warrants the promotion of writers who could lure the young back into the habit of reading. Donna Burgess confirms that reading trends are indeed down, certainly in the U.S.: 'recent studies say that reading, especially among teenagers and young adults in the United States, is on the decline.' (Burgess, 2009:.1), she reports.

The present essay hopes to raise awareness amongst English-speaking readers of the existence of Jason Dark (two of his novelettes are available in English translation on the Internet, and more are likely to follow) and to encourage academia to undertake a study of this remarkable literary phenomenon, a study which is long overdue. It is, parenthetically, my contention that the gripping types of plotline such as those devised by Jason Dark could help re-ignite or actually engender the desire to read amongst teenagers, whose avoidance of the reading habit has become, as indicated, a point of concern in recent years.





Critical Studies of Jason Dark

To the best of my knowledge, only two academic studies relating to Jason Dark have as yet been published. These are *Flammende Herzen: Unterhaltungsliteratur aus Westfalen*, edited by Walter G?dden (2007), and *Jason Dark- Drei Helden* by Dr. Astrid van Nahl (2008). These works are valuable as constituting the commencement of a critical engagement with Jason Dark, one which nevertheless needs to be vastly expanded, and I should like to cite some of the opinions on Dark which find expression in these two studies -both positive and negative.

Firstly, however, it is necessary to provide a very brief overview of the supernatural world created by Dark himself.

The Imaginative World and Stylistic Simplicity of Jason Dark

At the centre of most of his novels stands the figure of the British Scotland Yard detective, John Sinclair. Sinclair is a widely travelled investigator whose field of specialisation embraces the occult, the mythical and the mystical. Together with his Chinese Scotland Yard friend and colleague, Suko, John Sinclair frequently sallies forth in a variety of times and countries to do battle against an assortment of witches, necromancers, vampires and zombies. He is a fighter on the side of Good and Light, and his adversaries represent the darkest deviations of the human mind and soul. Here, for example, is the opening page of Dark's first John Sinclair novel, *The Night of the Necromancer*, where the reader is brought into contact with a certain megalomaniacal and demented professor named Orgow:

Midnight.

An ancient delivery van rumbled along a bumpy country lane, almost at walking pace.

In the driver's cab there sat three men.

The man behind the steering wheel was Professor Ivan Orgow. He stared out into the night from deep-set dark eyes, only sparsely illuminated by the light of the two headlamps. Ivan Orgow's thoughts were wholly fixed upon the task which lay before him. His eyes flickered at the thought of the power over which he presided. He, Ivan Orgow, held dominion over the dead. And this very night a deceased person would be restored to life.

The two men beside him could no longer think with clarity- they were no longer masters of their minds. Professor Orgow had induced upon them a hypnotic trance. All they could do was blindly carry out his orders.

The ancient delivery van reached its destination and stopped in front of the old, wrought-iron gates of the cemetery. Professor Orgow turned off the headlights. Then he pushed open the door of the vehicle and jumped out.

The mist had thickened. It bore down upon the chest like an oppressive suit of armour, impeding the breathing..¹

The simplicity of Dark's style is immediately apparent. Yet this is not to be smirked at-as some critics are wont to do (Gödden, 2007: 293). His is the simplicity which rightly belongs to the fairy tale. Poetic writers of the highest calibre, such as Austria's great novelist, Adalbert Stifter, struggled for years to attain a similar lucid simplicity of expression, which comes quite effortlessly and naturally to Dark. Of course, Jason Dark is no Stifter; but his seeming simplicity of style does conceal on its surface a plurality of imports and verbal resonances which unfold more fully in the course of the narrative. Here, for example, in the opening lines of *Night of the Necromancer*, one sees a coupling of vanquishing darkness and diminished light, megalomania and attendant restlessness of soul, domination and mental surrender, inner evil and outward atmospheric oppression which are all typical elements of the Darkian world and will find extensive expression in this particular novel. Only the conquest by Light (represented by the "clarity" of spirit of the aptly named John Sinclair hero figure, in whose name sin is counterbalanced by light) over the forces of Darkness can free these novels from the risk of descent into nihilism which they might otherwise run. In fact, the novels tend rather towards an optimistic *weltanschauung*, according to which the powers of evil can be captured, routed and nullified. It is also not without significance that numerous erstwhile hospital patients have written to Jason Dark and recounted how Dark's tales have aided them in their recovery from physical or emotional illness. Again, like Stifter in *The Indian Summer* (*Der Nachsommer*), Dark has created an oeuvre which is able to bring healing and regeneration into the minds of his readers.





Jason Dark's imaginative powers have rightly been praised. Indeed, Godden writes: 'As regards imagination, Jason Dark towers houses high in superiority above Sherlock Holmes creator, Conan Doyle.' (Gädden, 207: 293). This is eminent praise indeed-and is justly bestowed. The sheer inexhaustible inventiveness which Dark displays week upon week, in novel after novel, is testimony to a fertility of imagination which can rightly lay claim to lie within the realm of genius (although Dark himself, ever modest, would doubtless balk at such a designation of his talent).

Jason Dark's Creative Fertility and Powers of Atmospheric Delineation

As so often, the origins of literary fecundity remain a mystery even to their possessor. When asked where his ideas spring from, Jason Dark has revealingly replied:

I could say: from the air. I do not know myself. The ideas come so suddenly. I have the gift of being able to form an entire novel out of a thought which has come with lightning speed.²

It is this almost Mozartian ability to see, instantaneously, the whole work before the inner, creative eye which enables Dark to produce one novel a week. He jokingly refers to himself as 'a creative clerk' (kreativer Beamter)-a clerk in the service of the publishing house, Bastei-Lübbe, for which he has worked for numerous years-but the fair-minded reader would rather place the emphasis on the adjective, 'creative', than on the somewhat pejorative noun, 'clerk'. Lesser concocters of 'pulp fiction' have an embarrassingly thin body of language at their command, and a paucity of plot-inventiveness- but not so Jason Dark. His diction is surprisingly varied and rich in vivid imagery. One also occasionally encounters vocabulary which borders on the unusual and the unfamiliar. To dismiss his language as merely 'stereotyped' (schablonenhaft) and 'decidedly colloquial' (van Nahl, 2008) is to render Dark a disservice. True, there are certain hackneyed phrases which tend to recur across the spectrum of Dark's work (such as 'he shrugged his shoulders', which recurs in multiple novels), but most of Dark's writing is fresh, fleet and expressive, endowed with the power

to create a palpable atmosphere with the deftest of touches. Witness the vividness which Dark achieves in this scene of alp-induced murder (an alp is a kind of incubus or incarnate living nightmare in German folklore), from his novel, *The Torture Bed*:

The Alp was present, and began to press down (upon its victim). Max Bender experienced the nightmare in all its terrors. The Alp had taken on form, had become murderous and was depriving the man lying on the bed of air. He could not even lift up his arms. He lay on the bed like a prisoner whom invisible cords held fast. In less than two minutes the Nightmare had reached him and was now squatting upon his chest like some fat, repugnant cat seeking to crush the life out of a mouse.

Bender's breathing grew stertorous. He could not even utter a scream, for the pressure had reached his throat and encompassed it all round. If this continued, the Alp would end by stifling him.

Only in his thoughts could Bender cry out for help. But no one came to release him from his fearful plight. Moreover, the bed was now vibrating and shaking, as if it were the recipient of a command. Something akin to life had entered into this place of rest, a life that secreted something evil, which at the same time mixed itself with the black cloud enveloping the Alp.

Several seconds later he felt a raging pain in his right leg. Something had driven itself from below into his upper thigh, thoroughly piercing it. The pain was so savage and cruel, of a kind which he had never known before. When the material of his trousers grew wet and sticky, he knew that this derived from blood. His blood.

Jets of blood indeed spurted out and struck the shadow of the Alp squatting on his chest. The sweltering pain intensified to the point of unconsciousness. Exactly this was what transpired: Max Bender swooned. The last thing in life which he perceived was a suddenly renewed, unobstructed view of the bedroom door.

That door swung open. A figure stood there, laughing in malefic manner. It was precisely this laughter which accompanied Max Bender down to death.³

All the elements of a gripping narrative are present and conspire to make the reader wish to turn the page and





discover more. To secure such narrative effects in just three or four novels would not be particularly noteworthy, but to do so over the course of some 2,000 stories is an extraordinary feat indeed.

We can gain an example of the flexibility and meaningfulness of Dark's style (which is not stereotyped and unchanging, as some commentators like to claim) from the opening pages of his novel (the 443rd in the John Sinclair series) entitled *Lady Panthera*. Here we read:

'When man turns into a beast of prey and the beast of prey into a man, then flee, for then the time of the Apocalypse has come.'

Twice Thriller I pronounced this maxim before laughing and turning round. His laugh transformed into a grin. 'Do you understand that?' he addressed Thriller II and Thriller III.

'We have heard of it,' said Thriller II.

'And you?'

'I can't be bothered with such rot,' declared Thriller III. 'I want action-is that clear?'

'Don't we all.'

The eyes of Thriller II took on a hungry look. 'Then let's get some action going, damn it! It's about time!'

Thriller I had the situation under control. That is why he had placed Number One after his nickname. 'Patience, friends. We'll get us some.' He jerked his head towards the sentence written above the dark-painted door. 'We'll put on a show all right. We'll smoke them out. These guys won't have lost anything in London.'

Thriller III rubbed his hands together. 'If we don't do it, no one will.'

'Exactly!'

They would strike under the protection of darkness. It would be an attack indeed. Whether people got injured or killed in the process made no odds to them, it played no part in their considerations. They were fully and wholly pledged to the new violence, indeed were proud of it, for numerous newspapers and magazines had, of late, taken an interest in them.

'Skinheads' they called themselves, and they didn't give a toss for the law.

There were skinheads all over Europe and the States. A band of youngsters who had something against people of a different skin colour. And London was the right stamping ground for them. There were sufficient numbers of immigrants there, and the ranks of the skinheads were likewise ever increasing - one of the consequences of the unemployment which had spread across the whole land...

The three skinheads had formed themselves into a gang which carried out its operations independently. Their leader was 'Thriller I'. They had all but forgotten their real names and only addressed themselves as 'Thriller'...⁴

If we contrast this passage with that from *The Night of the Necromancer*, we immediately notice the difference. Whereas the former was written in a simple but formal style, as befitting a story centred on a brilliant but demoniacally deviant professor, the opening page of *Lady Panthera* adopts a more telegraphic and colloquial style which mirrors the verbal atmosphere created by the speakers and reflects the attitudes of those gangsters ('they didn't give a toss for the law') most effectively. In other words, Dark has adjusted his narrative tone to harmonise with the speaking style and character mode of his figures. This is a rather ingenious means of engendering a particular atmosphere - here, the atmosphere that surrounds a gang of decidedly ill-educated, tersely speaking, almost inarticulate roughs.

It is striking that these characters see themselves as 'putting on a show' and, within that show, maiming or killing people is a matter of complete indifference to them - it plays no role, no part (keine Rolle in German) in their considerations. These 'actors' are devoid of all morality, and provide no entertainment for others (as usual theatre or drama would) - only a brutalized form of diversion from their unemployment solely for themselves, for the gratification of their brutish drives.

We further note this process of dehumanization which Dark depicts in these characters via their nomenclature: they are no longer named, individualized human beings, but have made of themselves mere ciphers for violence. Accordingly, they have all but forgotten their real names and selected one name for the whole band: 'Thriller', in graded numerical ascent. This clever touch immediately



tells the reader something about these characters: they are all of a piece in their craving for 'thrills' and excitement. They seek 'action'-and in their subservience to this overweening desire have forfeited their human individuality, which would otherwise have been reflected in differentiated names. They are no longer truly human, but have become the wild 'beasts of prey' of which Thriller I speaks in the very opening lines of the novel.

As we shall later see, it has been said of the Darkian genre of pulp fiction that there is no concern with social issues manifest within it, no engagement with society on any level. This is a claim to which the lie is clearly given by this story. Writing at the time of the premiership of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and the presidency of Ronald Reagan in America, Dark is clearly aware of the rising tide of unemployment that was blighting those lands (and spreading into Europe) in consequence of Thatcherite / Reaganite policies, and he pinpoints the rise of the violent, racist skinhead movement as a direct result of the unemployment which (to quote the old adage) provided 'the devil's work for idle hands to do'. Dark is here casting a critical political eye over the social landscape of the country 'England' which he is especially describing.

In another novel, *Udexe Is Coming*, Dark opens his tale without any social or political implications, but in the following arresting manner:

The laundry room was still pervaded by the typical aroma of damp washing, although the three washing machines had long ceased running. They stood along a white-limed wall, and their circular drum-windows resembled so many gaping portholes.

The rotary clothes-stand on which the clothes were hung out during the daytime to dry was now folded up and leaning against the wall. The window behind it with its shaft of light was likewise shut, and the light bulb on the ceiling dispensed no illumination.

The room was dead, and over it hung the silence of the night. Yet, if anyone had listened attentively, they would have heard, now and then, the sound of a man's breathing.

O'Toole was standing by the door in the blind spot

and was waiting. This was already the sixth night that he had been lurking there. He had long grown accustomed to the smell of the laundry room and the darkness, as well as being alone. From time to time, when his legs pained him from the long standing, he would sit down upon one of the washing machines, only later to change his position.

He required no light. When the other came, he would hear him. And it was for him alone that he was waiting.

O'Toole had been infiltrated into the sanatorium as a private detective, since for some time past patients had been disappearing by night. A few had later surfaced again, half crazed, but others were no longer able to talk at all since they were no longer alive.

The police had investigated the cases but had not been able to establish anything, and so the whole affair had officially run into the sand, until O'Toole's deployment. The head doctor had personally engaged him. The two men knew each other, having for a time sat on the same school bench together. They had run into each other again at a class re-union, and it had really been only a whim of O'Toole's to leave his business card behind him in the hands of his comrades. Now a commission had sprung from it.

His assignment was - to catch a killer! (*Udexe kommt, 599, Hexen-Geister-Teufelsdiener, Bastei Lübbe, Bergisch Gladbach, 2005*).⁵

As so often, Dark displays a strong sense of place and atmosphere: the laundry room is tenebrous and claustrophobic. Yet by its very nature—a place of cleansing—it symbolizes the task which lies before the detective who is hiding there: the cleansing of society of a dark and dangerous killer. As yet that process of cleansing has not begun—the washing machines are still standing silent and idle—but they, like the detective, are waiting and soon a purging of society will commence.

We further note the nautical imagery of 'gaping portholes' and 'running into the sand', which conjure up a sense of vulnerability, emptiness, exposure and hazard: O'Toole is alone on a shifting ocean of uncertainty, engaged on a mission which until now has threatened irretrievably to run into a sandbank of failure.

Lastly, we are struck by the mood of darkness and





death which holds this venue in its embrace: the room is 'dead', the washing machines are silent and still, the detective is standing in a 'blind angle' (literally 'dead angle'), and the ceiling lamp sheds no light. The place has the silence and darkness of the grave. The stage has effectively been set for the thriller which is about to unfold.

Unjustified Criticism of Jason Dark's Genre of Fiction

As we have already anticipated, certain critics dismiss Dark's type of pulp fiction as having no bearing on society. Dr. Astrid van Nahl implicitly castigates the genre of 'trivial literature' or 'pulp fiction', to which she assigns Dark's works, quoting a Duden definition of it as that which is mere 'comfort literature', which has no effect upon society (van Nahl, 2008: 2). As we have seen, implicit social comment is not alien to Jason Dark. But Dr. van Nahl's stricture in any case begs the question: must literature necessarily exert an influence over society to validate the former's existence? Surely not. Literature is generally written by individuals for individuals, as much for diversion and entertainment as any other purpose, and there is no mandate placed upon literature's production that requires it to effect some form of profound societal change. We might also bear in mind that works which are seen at one time as mere sensationalist, popular or light fiction, can later come to be regarded as 'classic'. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the various detective and adventure stories by Conan Doyle spring to mind in this regard.

Allied to Nahls unjustified stricture mentioned above is her charge that works such as Dark's:

...offer the reader the opportunity of turning away from reality, of withdrawal from... reality and social pressures, enabling the reader to forget his own situation and dangling before his eyes a simulacrum-world or a dream world which accords with his desires. (van Nahl, 2008: 2).

But much 'serious' literature does this too: witness the works of the European Romantic writers such as Tieck and Hoffmann, of Edgar Allen Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, or the inward-turned, bizarre writings of Yukio Mishima of Japan.

Equally untenable is van Nahl's requirement for literature to establish a certain 'distance towards society, and question it' (van Nahl, 2008:3). Yet again, one can easily think of 'great' works of literature which do not question or critically probe the society out of which they sprang. A prime example of this would be Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which egregiously (from our modern standpoint) upholds the excesses of ruthless capitalism, the slave-trade, materialism, and abuse of animals. No one, however, would on this account dismiss *Robinson Crusoe* as a work which fails to attain the status of accomplished 'literature'.

Van Nahl, in her article, inclines to the view that students should be taught to recognize the manipulative mechanisms and intentions which are at work behind the façade of stories such as Jason Dark's. While accepting that Dark is a fit subject for scholarly study (and van Nahl's open-mindedness here is welcome), van Nahl seems to see such study chiefly in terms of pointing out how these texts influence the reader's consciousness and shape his opinions. But why should such analysis be confined to the stories that make up 'trivial literature', one might ask-as though 'higher' literature were exempt? All literature-indeed all art-'manipulates' the thoughts and emotions of its recipients; that is its function-to induce a change of consciousness, thought and emotion in those who engage with it. To single out-and implicitly criticize- Jason Dark for doing suchlike is nothing short of unjust.

Quoting the critic, M. Dahrendorf, on the subject of pulp fiction, van Nahl further presents the reader with the bizarre claim that 'the mechanisms of trivial literature are only effective because reality is unsatisfactory' (van Nahl 2008:5) and that 'study of trivial literature without simultaneous political instruction can scarcely be of value.' (van Nahl 2008: 5). One could equally argue that all literature, all art, all religion only appeals to those who engage with it because 'reality is unsatisfactory'. Indeed, it is the very basis and foundational tenet of all the spiritual literature which sprang from the Awakening experience of the Buddha, for instance, that 'life is unsatisfactory'. To say that stories such as Dark's only engender pleasure because real life is less than satisfying is unhelpfully trite and facile. Also, the



claim that fiction such as Dark's must be accompanied by 'political education' is worryingly prescriptive and smacks of 'thought control'. Who decides what type of 'political education' provides the correct framework for an understanding of Dark's world and works? Is not this proposal for 'political instruction' bordering on a desire for 'political indoctrination'?

Conclusion

Although Jason Dark's main literary commentator, Astrid van Nahl, sees Dark's use of language and plot in negative terms (as mere 'manipulation' of the reader—a charge which I have indicated to be unjustified), she does, however, see him as worthy of study, and additionally muses that it is no longer appropriate to reject Dark's type of 'trivial/ light literature' as automatically inferior, in an age which has witnessed a worrying decline in the general practice of reading. She writes:

The classification of light / trivial literature as something inferior is a prejudice which, in this age of non-reading, we can no longer afford and which is not encountered in many other countries in this pronounced form. (van Nahl, 2008: 5).

This is a sound and valid point. And it is one on which I should like to close. If we can encourage students to read more than they currently seem willing to undertake and if we can even stimulate them to read with enthusiasm and relish, this is gain indeed. I can think of few works better designed to inculcate the highly enjoyable and addictive 'reading habit' in the young and youthful than the imaginatively crafted fiction of plot-spinning genius, Jason Dark. ❖

Two of Jason Dark's early novelettes can be found in English on the Internet under the following URLs:

How It All Began: John Sinclair's First Case <http://www.webspawner.com/users/jasondark1/index.html>

The Night of the Necromancer

<http://www.webspawner.com/users/necromancer1/index.html>.







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