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Dying for Foie Gras: Murder, Politics and Ethical Food Production

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In recent years, culinary mysteries have enjoyed immense popularity in Germany. Marketed to both fans of detective fiction and food aficionados, they enjoy a large crossover appeal, which at least partially explains their commercial success. Ella Danz is the author of the Georg Angermüller mystery series (started in 2006, nine books so far) set in the Northern German Lübeck area. While this series, whose main protagonist is a police inspector who likes to cook and eat, did not start out as a culinary mystery series per se, it has developed into one of the most popular manifestations of this sub-genre.¹ Especially in Danz's most recent novels, cooking and other food-related issues have been taking up more and more room. In this essay, I focus on her 2012 novel *Geschmacksverwirrung* [Taste Confusion].² This text centers on the death of a food critic who is force-fed goose liver pâté in the same way geese and ducks are force-fed to produce foie gras. Due to the victim's cause of death, the perpetrators appear to be a militant animal rights group, and while investigating the crime, the detective (and thus also the reader) confronts important issues like factory farming and ethical food production.

As Marianne Lien states in her introduction to *The Politics of Food*, "food has emerged as a political topic par excellence. Capable of connecting individual bodies to abstract communities and techno-scientific innovations to moral concerns, food has become a highly charged and contested field" (2004, 1). Especially in movements like veganism, "what one *does* or *does not* consume is central to group membership" (Cherry *et al.* 2011, 233).³ In *Geschmacksverwirrung*, Danz explores these dynamics, both the connections between bodies and communities, and the moral considerations surrounding the conditions

of food production. Through the eyes of her protagonists, readers learn about unethical practices that all too often stay hidden behind food labels advertising natural origins and traditional recipes. Danz thus invites them to do more than enjoy reading a mystery novel; she also wants her readers to get involved in the politics of food and make responsible food choices.

Taste Confusion: Blood-Stained Practices in Food Production

Dedicated to all those who want to know what they eat (“Für alle, die wissen wollen, was sie essen” 5), *Geschmacksverwirrung* exposes unsavory practices in food production and marketing. One focus is on the question of whether the custom of force-feeding geese and ducks to produce foie gras, which literally translates as fatty liver, is ethical. Many animal rights activists decry *gavage*, the traditional method of producing foie gras, as torture of animals. The animals’ capacity for sentience usually serves as a baseline for arguments against foie gras. On the other side of the spectrum, gourmets who praise the delicacy’s velvety and rich texture point to ducks’ natural tendency to overeat and defend their own right to choose what to eat. Famous chefs have joined the controversy and clashed publicly on whether a ban on the production and sale of foie gras is needed to protect geese and ducks or whether this is an unwarranted political intervention into the lifestyle choices of individuals.⁴

Geschmacksverwirrung starts with a prologue from the perspective of a turkey living under the horrible conditions typical of factory farming. Signing “irgendeine dumme Pute” (2012, 10) [just another silly chook], the prologue’s narrator decries her crowded and dirty living conditions, rapid weight gain, artificially enlarged breasts, and the rampant injuries and diseases that are common among her friends. Although in German “dumme Pute” is a rather common insult for somebody, usually a woman, who is perceived as lacking intelligence, it becomes immediately obvious that stupidity is not one of the problems of the prologue’s narrator, who rather eloquently names the main issues and concerns associated with industrial poultry farming. It is only because “factory farms disavow animal sentience” and “this in turn enables the instrumental treatment of cattle, pigs, chickens, and other animals as commodified material objects” (Youatt, 351) that animals are treated as nothing more than a resource for human consumption.⁵

As Peter Messent outlines in “The Politics of Crime Fiction,” “one of the most productive ways of thinking about the genre is its relationship to the dominant social system: to the hierarchies, norms, and assumptions of the particular area, country, and historical period it represents” (2013, 11). This applies both to the accepted social norms and values—in this case relating to food

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production and consumption—and to relationships between individuals and communities. Due to its focus on the hidden and unsavory, crime fiction, more than any other genre, is able to expose societal ills and concealed dynamics. In Danz's novel, this exposure centers on two aspects: the unsavory living conditions of animals in factory farming (with a special focus on the production of foie gras), and the misleading marketing and lack of transparency in many large-scale food production companies. The process of discovery depicted in the text makes it easy for readers to follow along and make their own discoveries about food production and food marketing.

Danz deploys a variety of literary devices that underline her message that not everything is the way it seems. The most telling one is her usage of the word blood. Chapter one starts with the ominous words “Blutrot wallte es auf im Topf. Dunkles rotes Blut” (2012, 11) [Blood red it welled up in the pot. Dark red blood]. Contrary to the readers' possible assumption that an evil perpetrator is trying to dispose of the remnants of a crime, by the end of the paragraph, after a lengthy discussion of the color differences between arterial and venous blood, the content of the pot is revealed as a red beetroot soup that Lina, one of the protagonists of the novel, is cooking. From the beginning of the text, Danz thus sets the tone in not only playing with readers' expectations, but also in combining food and crime references.

The next time the word blood is mentioned, ten pages later, it seems to cover the body of a man gruesomely murdered and draped in a thick layer of goose feathers: “Blut! Unter den Federn war der Mann, denn um so einen handelte es sich wohl, rot von Blut!” (2012, 21) [Blood! Under the feathers was the man, because it appeared that it was a man, red with blood]. Once again, however, despite the fact that the man is actually a murder victim, the assumed blood turns out to be something else: red ink. The fake blood is part of an elaborately staged murder scene, conceived to falsely implicate a group of animal rights activists who supposedly would want to draw attention to the plight of geese and other animals who suffer for the production of specialty foods like foie gras.

The centerpiece of the crime scene is a large funnel inserted into the victim's throat. The funnel, similar to those used for *gavage*, has been used to force-feed liver pâté to the victim, effectively turning him into a goose. What is interesting about this scene, besides the way in which the perpetrators turn the human victim into a highly stylized animal victim, is how Danz once again combines food and crime references. Food items, like the liver pâté, become a murder weapon: The victim has died of suffocation: “Tod durch Ersticken an einem Brocken Pastete” (2012, 35) [death by suffocation on a piece of pâté], whereas the apparent blood, a typical accompaniment of crime scenes, turns out to be mere ink in this scene, or beetroot soup in the opening scene, earlier in the same chapter.

The third and last time a variation of the word blood appears, is when the murder victim's stepson Lorenzo talks about the nightmares he used to have as a child, after his stepfather Victor Hagebusch not only forced him to eat huge amounts of meat, but also made him watch while he skinned rabbits or butchered wild boar: "Ich gruselte mich fürchterlich und nachts träumte ich von blutigen Fleischfetzen, die überall in meinem Zimmer und meinem Bett waren" (2012, 66) [I was really creeped out, and at night I dreamed of bloody pieces of meat that were all over my room and in my bed]. This time, blood is associated with meat—it is not human blood that causes anxiety and nightmares, as would befit a murder mystery, but the animal blood that is a crucial part of meat. On a linguistic level, the horror is thus shifted once again from the murder of a human being to the distress associated with turning animals into meat.

Red Herrings and the Politics of Food

As is often the case in crime novels, the murder victim Hagebusch had more than one enemy. His unemployed stepson Lorenzo Calese, who clearly hated him and also happens to be a friend of an animal rights activist with a prior police record, is an early favorite for the role of murderer. This suspicion seems to be confirmed when the police match his DNA to a threatening letter found in Hagebusch's mail box. The note reads "Pass auf, Fleischfresser—wir kriegen dich!" (2012, 183) [Watch out, carnivore—we will get you!] and is "signed" with drawings of a cow, a pig, and a chicken. This of course turns out to be a false clue and nothing more than an ill-conceived, late-night prank: Although Lorenzo despised his stepfather and wanted to scare him, he is not responsible for his murder.

Lorenzo's sister Lina Stucki is another early suspect and, albeit without bad intentions, ends up being at least partly involved in the events leading up to Hagebusch's murder. Because of tensions between Lina and her family (her mother failed to protect Lina and her brother from their stepfather Hagebusch), Lina left home at age 16 and moved to Switzerland, where she married two years later. Now divorced, she has returned to Northern Germany and is the owner of a small restaurant, "Torten, Suppen, Meer" [Pastries, Soup, and More]. It is revealed that she is also part of a group of friends who wanted to take action against the horrible conditions in animal factories (2012, 267). They began to collect information and distribute it via the internet and through fliers handed out in front of supermarkets. After realizing how difficult it was to get the attention of consumers, who only take notice when there is a scandal, they decided that their actions had to be more spectacular. Of course even when confronted by scandal, most consumers' behaviors change for only a short time. Lina sums up the problem as follows:

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Es ist sehr schwer, die Aufmerksamkeit der Verbraucher auf diese Problematik zu lenken. Die horchen immer nur auf, wenn es einen neuen Lebensmittelskandal gibt. Dann ekeln sie sich oder haben Angst um ihre Gesundheit, essen eine Zeitlang kein Fleisch mehr, kaufen nur noch Bio-Eier und drei Wochen später ist alles wieder vergessen [2012, 269].

[It is very difficult to direct the consumers' attention to this problem. They only listen when there is a new food scandal. Then they are disgusted or afraid for their health, don't eat meat for a while, buy only organic eggs, and three weeks later everything is forgotten again.]

The more spectacular action that they decide on is the filming of a video that exposes farm animals' unsavory living conditions. They break into a rather randomly selected poultry farm. Lina, who has had no contact with her stepfather for a long time, runs into Hagebusch by accident and ends up telling him about their activities protesting against factory farming. Hagebusch offers to help her get the video distributed, and despite her better judgment she gives him a copy—which he then uses to blackmail Petermann, the company owner Hagebusch used to work for and who ends up murdering him. Without intending to cause any harm, Lina initiates a chain of events that results in Hagebusch's death.

Petermann's accomplice Jan Otto Oswald is a poultry farmer whose survival depends on his biggest customer, Petermann. After the avian flu had forced him to kill thousands of his animals—unnecessarily, as it turns out—Petermann helped him with a loan, and then continued to shamelessly exploit the farmer's precarious financial situation. When Lina's group targets Oswald's farm, Petermann uses this opportunity to blackmail him, claiming he cannot do business with somebody who is in the activists' spotlight. Although Oswald is certainly guilty of being an accomplice to murder (unaware that Petermann's real plan is to kill Hagebusch, Oswald participates in the assault on the journalist), he is also a victim of both Petermann's ruthless business practices and random targeting by activists who end up destroying his livelihood. With the help of this character, Danz is thus able to highlight farmers' dependency on the companies that buy their products.

Another false lead in the murder investigation is the owner of a restaurant who became the victim of Hagebusch's unethical business practices. Hagebusch, who under the pseudonym B-Savarin⁶ published online restaurant reviews in a widely read food blog, used to trade good reviews in return for free food, or publish a bad review when asked to pay. Max Beuerle, the owner of a fine dining establishment, accepted Hagebusch's offer to give him good publicity in exchange for free meals but later tried to rescind the deal. A vengeful Hagebusch then not only criticized the menu and the execution of the dishes, but also insinuated that the famous chef used expired frozen food in his overpriced creations (2012, 167).

With the help of these suspects, whether they turn out to be the real perpetrator or not, Danz is thus able to explore salient issues in the world of food production, marketing and restaurant reviews. Petermann's company Landglück [rural happiness] in particular provides ample fodder for this type of exposition. Their goose liver pâté, a so-called "Edelprodukt für jeden anspruchsvollen Gourmet" (2012, 113) [premium product for every discerning gourmet], is decorated with a stamp that proclaims it is "hausgemacht" (2012, 111) [homemade] according to an old special recipe, and like all of Landglück's products it is nicely packaged and sports a logo with a farmhouse and a happy goose. This idyllic farm ambiance could of course not be further from the truth. Instead of the small-scale, traditional production methods that the labels advertise, Landglück's products are manufactured in large, modern factories. In describing his products, Petermann makes frequent use of terms like certified production, ecology, and sustainability—terms that sound good, but are ultimately rather meaningless. More often than not, the list of ingredients written in very small letters belies the name of the product: The truffled goose liver pâté that is used to murder Hagebusch, for example, contains almost 70 percent pork fat and pork liver, and only 10 percent goose liver and 1 percent truffle (118). A similar disparity between appearance and essence becomes apparent in regard to the education of consumers: While Petermann's company promises complete transparency to customers, it only allows factory visits at predetermined times.

Not everything is the way it seems, and this truism applies doubly to Danz's text: in regard to both the mystery itself and the politics of food. This, I argue, is one of the reasons why culinary mysteries are so well suited for exploring troubling issues within the world of food. Solving crimes requires skills that are transferable to discovering hidden truths concerning food, like the fact that truffled goose liver pâté may contain large amounts of pork fat and only a tiny amount of truffle, or that factory animals never get to see the green grass and blue sky depicted on the packaging of food products. As in many culinary mysteries, food also serves as a litmus test: A protagonist's relationship to food reveals his or her personality traits, and is indicative of the character's relationship to the world at large.

For the socially- and environmentally-conscious gourmet Lina, cooking is important to her emotional well-being. In a world full of cruelty—against animals and, since this text is a work of crime fiction, also against people—cooking relaxes her, takes her mind off things, and helps her feel reconciled with the world (2012, 13).⁷ In her restaurant, she offers her customers a seasonal and regional cuisine that focuses on a wide variety of vegetarian dishes and only uses meat from small, regional farms that raise their animals organically and in a species-appropriate way. A firm believer in the adage that less is more, especially as far as meat is concerned, she does not shy away from

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educating her customers about the advantages of sustainable food production and the evils of factory farming. When a customer is dismayed by the high prices of meat dishes on Lina's menu and complains that he just wants "ein ordentliches Schnitzel" (2012, 104) [a proper pork cutlet], she admonishes him: "wenn ich Ihnen erzählen würde, wo Ihr ordentliches Schnitzel herkommt und was alles damit gemacht wurde, würde Ihnen sowieso der Appetit vergehen" (2012, 105) [if I told you where your proper pork cutlet comes from and what has been done to it, you would certainly lose your appetite].

Such statements almost make Lina sound like a spokesperson for Danz's own beliefs about food. Like Lina, Danz is very concerned about animal rights. In a recent interview, she explains her commitment to slow food, culinary pleasure, and a sustainable culture of eating:

Es geht nicht darum, das Essen in Edel-Restaurants zu pflegen, sondern eine nachhaltige Esskultur zu praktizieren. Das heißt 'Weniger ist mehr'—weniger Fleisch, für das ich mehr bezahle, aber weiß, woher es kommt und wie es produziert wurde, tut nicht nur mir gut. Die Stichworte *saisonal* und *regional*, mittlerweile in guten Restaurants an der Tagesordnung, gehören auch dazu ["Sieben Fragen an Ella Danz"].⁸

[It's not about celebrating food in fine restaurants, but about practicing a sustainable food culture. That means "less is more"—less meat, for which I pay more, but know where it comes from and how it was produced, that's good not just for me. The keywords *seasonal* and *regional*, which are by now common in good restaurants, are also a part of this.]

Danz translates this commitment to sustainable food to her mysteries. Her protagonist Lina clearly follows these guidelines in her own restaurant, both in regard to the dishes that she offers and in the way she tries to educate her customers about food. In her most recent culinary mystery *Schockschwerenot* (2015) [Gorblimey!], Danz goes even further by including recipes with notes in the list of ingredients that specify readers should use products like "Eier aus tiergerechter Haltung" (2015, 339) [eggs from chickens raised humanely]. She also indicates where consumers can find lists of ecologically sustainable seafood (2015, 337).

Series protagonist police inspector Georg Angermüller, who features in all the books of this series, also appreciates fresh, high quality regional food in simple yet tasty dishes. He knows about food, likes to cook, and does not eat cheap, mass-produced meat. In the words of one critic, Angermüller fights against not only crime, but also bad food: "Georg Angermüller [...] der nicht nur gegen das Verbrechen, sondern auch gegen schlechtes Essen kämpft" ("Agatha Christie des Gourmetkrimis" 2014).⁹ Recently separated from his wife, Angermüller is forced to redefine his relationships with his family and friends. Whenever he spends time with his fourteen-year-old twin daughters (twice in *Geschmacksverwirrung*), he cooks with them. While he knows how

to make complicated and time-consuming foods like a fancy almond tart—despite being separated, he prepares this delicacy for his wife’s birthday—Angermüller and his daughters generally choose to cook regional home-style food like cabbage noodles with cheese or pancakes with homemade applesauce. These dishes are imbued with more than nutritional value: They are described as capable of warming the soul and making his new apartment feel almost like a real home (2012, 87).

Other characters in *Geschmacksverwirrung* are also defined through their relationship to food. Angermüller’s sidekick Claus Jansen, a younger and less sophisticated police officer who talks in a strong regional dialect, likes fast food and large servings of meat. The food that he eats marks him as a member of a lower socio-economic class, as well as reinforcing the age difference between Angermüller and Jansen. He is portrayed as capable of learning, however, in regard to both his job and the food that he consumes. This is made obvious by his unexpected enjoyment of the high quality vegetarian food that Lina serves in her restaurant. Although he first complains about the menu: “Vegetarischer Burger! So wat ess ich nich” (2012, 138) [Vegetarian burger! I ain’t eating that], he then ends up ordering (and enjoying) two slices of a vegetarian pizza with tomatoes, garlic and feta cheese.

Angermüller’s new love interest Anita, however, does not seem likely to reappear later in the series. Completely uninterested in food, she prefers drinking to eating whenever she and Angermüller go out, causing him to return home hungry from their dates (2012, 16). When she also declines the offer to eat pancakes with Angermüller and his girls, it becomes exceedingly obvious that she is not the right partner for him. Nor is this the first time that food-related differences become the marker and signifier of Angermüller’s failed relationships: His estranged wife also failed to share his interest in food. Astrid, who allows herself any type of culinary excess only on her birthday (2012, 163), is described as overly concerned with her weight. She exhibits much greater restraint than her spouse and, over the course of the series, admonishes him more than once for his occasional overindulgence in food.

Like all the mysteries in this series, and many other food-centered crime novels, *Geschmacksverwirrung* also provides an appendix with recipes. This practice has proven popular with readers who want to cook what the protagonists are cooking. Many publishers use these recipes for publicity, for example staging dinners based on the food that features in the novel or offering samples of food from the text at public readings by the author. Adding recipes to culinary mysteries also allows bookstores to display the books in the cookbook as well as the mystery section, thus doubling exposure. The recipes in *Geschmacksverwirrung* include Lina’s beetroot soup with ginger, special occasion treats like the labor-intensive almond cake that Angermüller bakes for

his wife's birthday party, the home-style fare he cooks with his daughters, and recipes attributed to Angermüller's friends, like Klas-Dieter's exotic ground beef. This wide range of recipes not only tries to appeal to readers' varied tastes, it also highlights the main characters' culinary talents—and their ability to adapt to circumstances.

Conclusion

Besides playing an important role in showing a character's personality traits, the rather lengthy descriptions of food and cooking scenes serve to forge a connection between readers and protagonists. Food is an effective way to get readers involved in the story.¹⁰ Because of these scenes, readers, especially those who enjoy good food and cooking themselves, are more likely to relate to both Angermüller and Lina. Readers who identify with a character tend to see the world from this character's perspective, which in turn makes them more open to his or her belief system and agenda—as in Lina's case, the fight for a more sustainable and less cruel food system. Culinary mysteries like this series are thus able to address consumers who might be reluctant to face these issues otherwise. The pleasure of reading mysteries opens a gateway for readers, especially those who are interested in food and cooking, to delve into the politics of food.

With the help of her culinary mysteries, Danz is able to reach a wider audience for her favorite cause. Instead of distributing fliers in front of supermarkets, she writes books. By moving the focus from the murder victim—a rather unpleasant and not very likeable character—to suffering animals, she skillfully develops and engages her readers' sympathies. Shifting concerns from the murder victim who died by foie gras to the animals that die for foie gras is a political statement that asks readers to respond and react. Food choices are political and can have a large impact on how food is produced.¹¹ It is therefore up to consumers to demand more sustainably-produced food instead of continuing to support large-scale agribusinesses whose sole focus is on producing cheap meat and increasing companies' profit margins.

NOTES

1. Recent critics have called Ella Danz the Agatha Christie of gourmet crime fiction ("Agatha Christie des Gourmetkrimis" 2014). Other popular German-language culinary mystery series include Brigitte Glaser's Katharina Schweitzer series (2003–2013), Tom Hillenbrand's Xavier Kieffer series (started in 2011, five books to date), Eva Rossmann's Mira Valensky series (started in 1999, 18 books so far), and Carsten Sebastian Henn's culinary mysteries: the Julius Eichendorff series (2002–2008) and the Professor Adalbert Bietigheim series (started in 2011, five books to date). For an overview of these crime series see Henderson (2015).

2. None of Danz's mysteries has been translated into English so far: All translations are my own.

3. Cherry *et al.* use the term “consumption identities” to “designate the ways material consumption practices proclaim a person’s values and commitment to a given cultural movement” (2011, 233).
4. For a detailed discussion of the controversy surrounding foie gras see Caro (2009) and Youatt (2012).
5. Singer (2015) asserts in his classic *Animal Liberation* that “most human beings are speciesists in their readiness to cause pain to animals when they would not cause a similar pain to humans for the same reason” (50). Speciesists, according to Singer’s definition, “allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species” (39).
6. An obvious reference to Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin.
7. As Saladino (2013) has pointed out in his discussion of the popularity of culinary mysteries, appetite for food can be read as “an affirmation of being alive in the face of continuous death.”
8. This commitment to a sustainable culture of eating matches a recent federal initiative in Germany that attempts to improve the welfare of farm animals. Scientists have developed systems that track objective measures like heart rate, breathing frequency, stress hormones, and movement of farm animals and try to determine which changes produce the greatest effects. Unfortunately there is still a large disconnect between many consumers’ general support of animal welfare and their willingness to pay more for the meat that they buy.
9. See also Weingartner who praises Danz’s treatment of important social issues within the context of entertaining crime fiction and exquisite culinary pleasures: “Genau diese Mischung aus unterhaltsamem Kriminalroman mit exquisiten Gaumenfreuden und gesellschaftskritischem Hintergrund machen die Geschichten rund um Georg Angermüller zu einer spannenden Lektüre” (71) [It is exactly this mixture of entertaining crime novel with exquisite culinary pleasures and socio-critical background that makes the stories about Georg Angermüller gripping reading].
10. For a detailed discussion of culinary mysteries’ appeal to female readers see Henderson (2014), especially 234–236.
11. See also Halkier (2004) and Stolle *et al.* (2005) who examine the ways consumers use food purchasing and food consumption as strategies for political activism.

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