

GRM. Brainfuck

Sibylle Berg

Novel

German



The Brave New World will be here in a few years. Perhaps it has already arrived. Every day, another western country turns autocratic. There is the looming threat that algorithms will replace human beings. Great Britain, the birthplace of capitalism, has now perfected it. But four children have decided to break – rather than obey – the rules. Very thoroughly. Welcome to the world of GRM.

“Grime seemed to have been invented just for her. Don didn’t know who had invented it or out of what components – that was the stuff of discussions between young men who were able to project an aura of invincibility by deploying insider terminology – Don just knew that the music sounded the way she wanted to feel. Angry and dangerous.”

Title

GRM. Brainfuck

Publisher

Kiepenheuer & Witsch, Köln

Publication date

April 2019

Pages

634

ISBN

978-3-462-05143-8

Translation rights

Iris Brandt

ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de

Author

Sibylle Berg lives in Zürich. She is the author of 24 plays, 14 novels and numerous radio plays and essays. The awards she has received include the Wolfgang Koeppen Prize (2008), the Else Lasker-Schüler Drama Award (2016) and the Kassel Literary Prize for Grotesque Humour (2019). Her novels, journalism and theatre plays have been translated into 34 languages.

Photo: Katharina Lütcher

GRM. Brainfuck

Sibylle Berg

Excerpt translated by Tim Mohr

The Millennium
began lousy.

There was no Y2K bug.

There were no god damn catastrophes.

The thing is, the citizens of the Western world had been looking forward to something finally happening after the endlessly dull 1990s. Something that didn't have to do with a financial crisis that only offered a modicum of intrigue to investment bankers as their bodies plunged the last few meters toward impact on the pavement – Will my well-sculpted body splatter on the sidewalk the same way as a fat, white, loser's body? Or will it bounce back up into the air?

The new millennium had a title. It was. ADHD. And beneath the title, in italics, was written: *We're reorganizing shit.*

It was the time when Facebook got big. When lots of older people thought that moronic site *was* the internet.

It was the time of the mass hoaxes, mass manipulation. Unbelievably quickly people became addicted to the Likes of strangers. Even more quickly, young people got addicted to a kind of arousal made up of a mix of bullying, violence, sex, and bullshit.

It was the time when genuine human cruelty was supplemented virtually.

When the yearning for understanding gave way to the rage of the ignorant.

Never before had there been so many conspiracy theories spreading like wildfire. The Vatican, the Koch Brothers, the Mont Pelerin Society, the Club of Rome, the reptilian elite, the flat earthers – with the complexities of the world seemingly increasing by the day, so too did the population's desire for a god of thunder.

It was the time before something.

It's always the time before something.

Later, after the new millennium had gotten warmed up a bit, there'd been a collective event that everyone found universally exciting: an airplane flew into the Pentagon and left a large hole in the building that looked like someone had dug a tunnel in a sandcastle with a

wet hand. Two other planes landed in skyscrapers. The skyscrapers imploded, and again people jumped out of windows.

It was the millennium during which doubt spread through the global population. And it became normal to mistrust the state and intelligence services, the press and academics, the weather, books, vaccines, scientists and women.

The new millennium brought an array of unbeatable benefits for people lucky enough to be born just then. Globally, life improved. So they said. People lived longer and more happily, education was better, infants survived the infant stage. Markets had made it all happen. Hooray for markets.

There were a few losers. They'd either had bad luck or hadn't tried hard enough to succeed. Everyone could make something of their life. As long as they wanted to. Super.

They extracted fossil fuels. They'd liberated natural gas and oil from the seabed with hydraulic fracking. Stuxnet—the computer virus—slowed down the Iranian nuclear program. Blockchain, which would render banks redundant, was invented. As was the e-bomb. The world was reorganized, the West fought to retain its importance. In the East, China, Russia, Japan, and Korea came together to redefine markets.

Voice recognition was introduced for computers, though machine learning wasn't yet talked about much. People had mobile phones. They took pictures of themselves. They had things to do. Nonstop.

(.....)

Don was –
Furious.

Many couldn't manage it. To muster such rage. Most of the older people who hung around Don's city were numb and tired and squatted in corners and barely had enough energy to lift their heads. Once in a while they'd be fed. But their stomachs couldn't tolerate it, this solid food in an empty existence, and they'd throw up, only to be too weak to lift their heads out of the vomit. Most of the people Don encountered were old. But that was no wonder at seven – or nearly seven.

Or nearly eight, but of course older looking. Or at least believing she looked older. Don's hair grew straight up. Her eyes were crooked and dark, and Don was little, even for a nearly seven-or-eight-year-old. She was little and furious. Don's rage was so ever present in her daily life that she would never think of saying: "Fucking hell, am I pissed off today." She knew no other condition. She'd been furious since birth. Or at least as early as she could remember. She hated the world where she had to live. Which consisted of a few square meters.

She hated this world and refused to come to terms with it. She had no relationship with her place in it, or rather the place allotted to her by virtue of her birth, with the preordained path set out for her, beginning with the looming poor education. In the event she survived that and didn't accidentally get caught up in a stabbing, an attempt to secure an apprenticeship would follow.

Not getting an apprenticeship, sitting around in government agencies and applying for welfare, getting no welfare because some document or other is missing; coming home to find her mother's hung herself, leaving the apartment, landing in some kind of shelter for young women, getting pregnant, getting beat up by someone for getting pregnant, giving up the baby for adoption, or not, it didn't matter. She'd wait for an apartment in a public housing project, start to drink and smoke crack and watch TV, staring at other people's pseudo-life, or life as it's supposed to be. Light-skinned people who drink tea in their gardens and do honest work with their deft hands. They fall in love, the people on TV. And then it happens: fucking violin music.

Nobody fell in love in Don's world. The people in her city hated each other or clung to each other because of a sense of panic they all felt, and nobody could say where it came from, this sense of unease. They had apartments, after all. Most of them. They had food. A kind of food.

Don read a lot, understood little, but still far more than an adult would think possible of a so-called child. Don felt:

Rage.

Are you serious? This pile of shit that you plunked down here? "Watch it! That's what's left. Not great,

but it's yours. This is the earth that we've eaten bare, this is your neighborhood, your city, which houses workers so they can efficiently produce some useless shit that nobody needs. Got it? It doesn't require anything of the people in your city except to vote for right-wing nationalist idiots who always have an answer to the question of who to blame."

When people know who to blame, they feel better, because then divine justice is restored. And there's a target for their hate. In Don's city you hated foreigners. Period. Don's city, that she would never leave, where she would waste away her entire life. Where it would end, though actually it was already over even before it began, because she was born in the wrong place. To the wrong parents, and on top of it all the weather was wretched. Had anyone asked her? Had anyone asked her to take part in these proceedings, run according to rules that she had no say in? What human obligation was she fulfilling with her stay here, shitting among the eight billion people - or, by the time the thought was finished, perhaps it was nine - who were crawling around looking to see if they could conjure up some sort of advantage somehow. Who all wanted - something.

Life was a gift.

This unbelievably stupid saying hung in the damp kitchens of the slum residents, embroidered on pink wall hangings. What happened if you rejected it? What if you just had no interest in this gift in the form in which it was intended for you? Nobody escaped their surroundings through work. There was no work anymore anyway.

It was impossible to attain better living conditions, there was simply no space available in a world where the few were intent on keeping the many at bay.

"Why did you do that?" you want to ask the old people. "Why have children you hate because they're loud, because they're losers - from the word go, because you can see yourselves and your miserable childhoods in them, because you know you're going to screw it up, just like your parents did and your parents' parents did, by passing on this hopeless existence.

"What's the point? Leave the children soaked in their own urine at the foot of the bed where you're passed out drunk or fucking somebody? You get off on their tiny bones that are so easily broken, on the feeling of

finally having power over somebody who's scared of you, and then you look at those children, your eyes glazed over, and hate them for their neediness, that's so much like your own. You were never helped either, not by anyone.

"Your dull brains get some sort of satisfaction from tormenting your children, do they? You'll show them, eh? Those above you. The ones who turned you away, pushed you from the city centers where they drive around in elegant electric cars and speak of an ever more prosperous future.

"You could go on strike. But what from, since you don't do anything. Nobody would care. You could start an armed resistance, but – you don't have the energy. Or the weapons. And no idea whom to aim them at. So you just lie there. With your face in your vomit.

"Why are there still men wandering around freely out there who don't want to be fathers, they just want to turn up to fuck or to beat women, beat them to death, before they slump into the corner and say: This isn't what I wanted. You didn't want any of this? It just happened that it stinks outside and rains nonstop. And that from the very first moment everyone has to be afraid of everyone else, because they have this so-called survival instinct. Nobody can bear it."

Don couldn't bear it.

And

Refused to accept her preordained role as scum.

And

Wasn't waiting for love anymore,

Wasn't waiting for something like a future to sprout in front of her door. Nothing will ever grow there, it's a desert left behind by the elderly, along with these so-called living – living? – conditions. And yes, god damn it, Don was passive-aggressive, she was female, she couldn't do any better. Was she supposed to take testosterone injections just to get more enraged, was she supposed to shoot herself up with hormones to try to convince herself she was smarter than she was, and that she ruled the world?

People like her had been put on display in zoos in the old days. The thought occurred to her randomly.

When people have the opportunity to torture others, they take it. When they have the chance to take some-

thing away from others, they do it, this mechanism, or call it: this instinct. That they let guide them, without thinking, that they give free rein to eradicate anything and everything that stands in their way –

Don hated the stupidity, the brutality, the deviousness and deceitfulness, the stench, the hairless, sweating bodies and the slimy fingers that tested everything for commercial potential.

"You want war, you got war."

Said Don. To herself.