

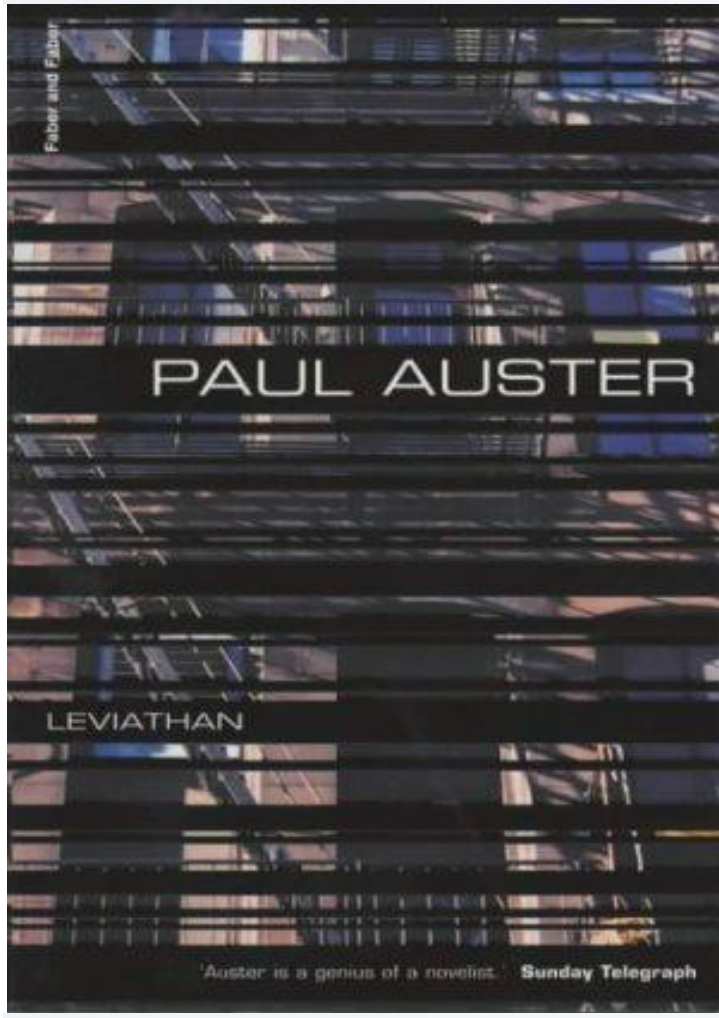
# PAUL AUSTER AND POLITICS:

## Forms and Strategies of Political Commentary in Selected Novels

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### INTRODUCTION

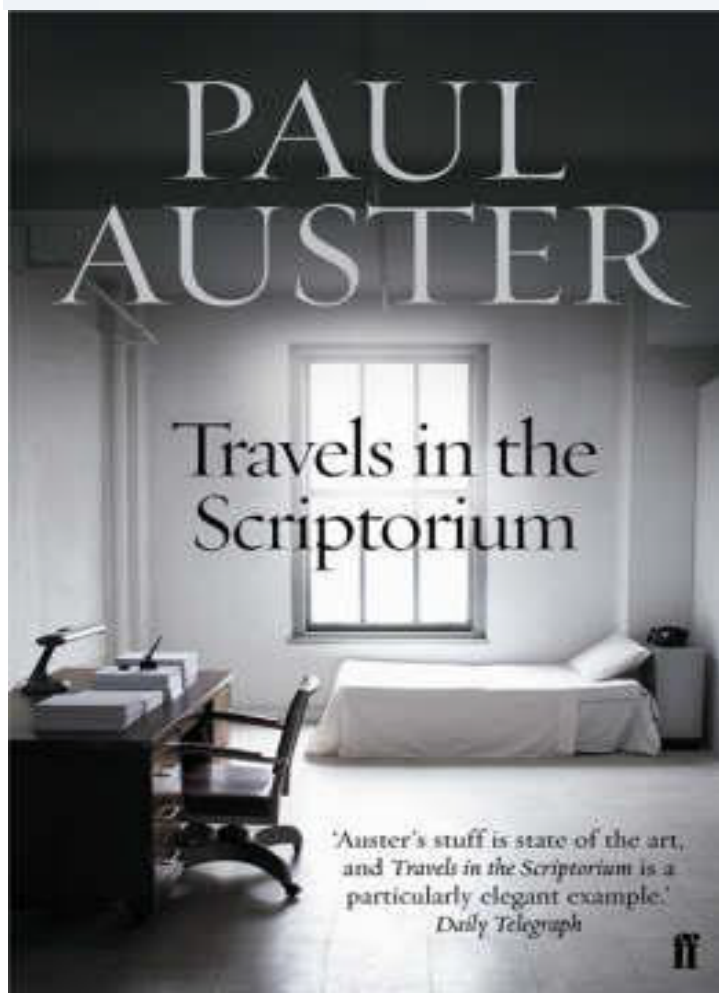
Generally, Paul Auster is not considered to be a political author, but Hutcheon remarks that “postmodern art cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representation – its images and stories – are anything but neutral.” The paper investigates to what extend selected works by Paul Auster convey a political or social commentary, and which strategies are applied to communicate political content in the novels. The main focus is on three novels by Paul Auster, which are *Leviathan*, *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark*. These novels give information about Auster’s political engagement throughout the last twenty years, as *Leviathan* was published in the early nineties, whereas *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark* were written relatively recently, engaging with American society of the early twenty-first century.



#### LEVIATHAN:

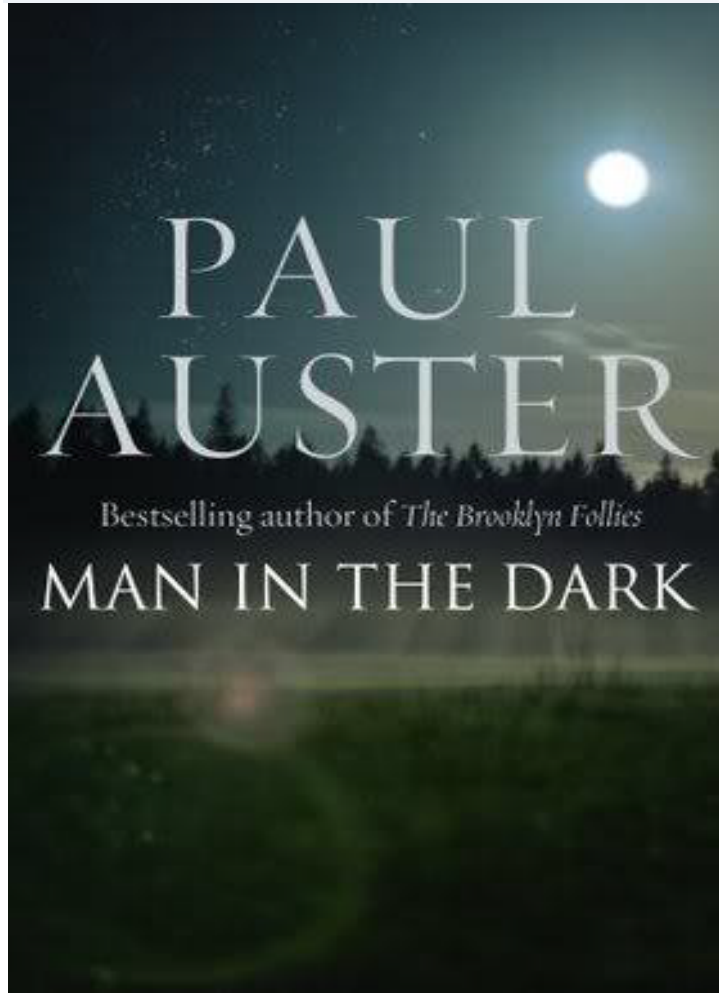
In *Leviathan*, the immediate social background is American society in the late nineteeneighties, i.e. America under Ronald Reagan as President of the United States, but it is also influenced by the revolutionary spirit of 1968.

In the novel, Auster explores two concepts of authorship and the contemporary author’s role in society. He examines the concept of personal and political freedom, which is closely linked to the Statue of Liberty as a national symbol, and political terrorism is discussed. In this context allusions to Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1650) and American Transcendentalism (19<sup>th</sup> century), especially the work of David Henry Thoreau, are certainly no coincidence.



#### TRAVELS IN THE SCRIPTORIUM:

*Travels in the Scriptorium* is a political parable. Its social or cultural background, which is contemporary America after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, is not evident at first sight. Nevertheless there are palpable reasons that justify the conclusion that Auster strongly comments on the Bush administration, high security prisons and the question of the objectivity of intelligence reports, which were highly topical in 2001 and 2002. Furthermore, *Travels in the Scriptorium* is full of intertextual references, mainly referring to Auster’s earlier fiction, playing with the readers’ desires and changing the perception of his earlier novels.



#### MAN IN THE DARK:

At first sight *Man in the Dark* is a family story, discussing personal pain and human suffering. But who is the man in the dark in *Man in the Dark*? It might be the protagonist who, suffering from insomnia, envisages a fictitious war. This war establishes a parallel world to ‘our’ reality; it is an alternative reality that started to develop after the 2000 presidential election, which made George W. Bush President of the United States of America. But the word ‘man’ in the title might also refer to mankind, as the novel discusses in detail the atrocities of war, from the Second World War to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.



### THE AUTHOR: PAUL AUSTER

- born in 1947
- lives in New York City
- began his writing career in 1974
- author of poems, essays, plays, screenplays and novels

### ZUR PERSON

Geburtstag: 15.01.1986

Wohnort: Mülheim an der Ruhr

Studium: Universität Duisburg-Essen  
von 2005 bis 2010

Studiengang: Lehramt GHR,  
mit dem Schwerpunkt HRGe  
Fächer: Mathematik und Englisch



Zurzeit arbeite ich als wissenschaftliche Hilfskraft im Fachbereich Mathematik. Ab August 2010 werde ich als Fremdsprachenassistentin an der St. Louis University, Missouri, USA Deutsch unterrichten.

### CONCLUSION

Auster claims: “I am not a politician, but when something touches you deeply, it is impossible not to react.” At first sight, Auster’s novels engage with ‘the private,’ discussing the individual in a postmodern society, but postmodern art cannot but be political, and Auster is certainly a child of his time. In the three novels he combines political and social criticism with themes and topics concerning the individual. The fate or destiny of each individual cannot exist independent of the specific political or social climate in Auster’s novels, so that ‘the personal’ becomes a product of contemporary circumstance. By these means Auster criticises the political and social context. In his works Auster shows that in a postmodern society, which is governed by uncertainty and chance, personal ideals, such as democracy and freedom, cannot but be considered problematic. Although ideals must exist, they cannot be attained in any final sense, because the personal as much as the political is governed by the unknown or unrepresentable. Consequently, Auster does not discuss the ideal itself or how it can be achieved, but draws attention to situations where the ideal is not met.