ON THE AESTHETICS OF POPULISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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A CASE FOR ART

Essay by **Gunnar Schmidt***

For some time now, a spectre has been haunting Western democracies, the spectre of populism. What is assembled under the term populism are antiquarian movements, associations of contemporaries who do not want to follow the rhythm of cultural progress and enlightenment. The habitus of populists is similar to those of naughty children who break the rules of etiquette and, for this purpose, they cloak themselves in historical costumes from the totalitarian past. The populists praise the authoritarianism of one opinion and criticise the democratic perception of diversity as a threat to identity, which according to their understanding should arise from the myth of the national. Emotions of exaggerated anger and revulsion serve as an authentication of their attitude.

Populism — a farce?

According to a now widespread interpretation, populism is the result of a divide: on the one side, there are the individuals who respond to the rapid changes and manifold challenges of digitisation with the ability to learn and adapt themselves; they welcome the potential of expanding knowledge, communication and enjoyment. On the other side, the populists appear to be losers, defenders of yesterday's past and inflexible stick-in-the-muds who feel under attack from or overwhelmed by the openness of the process of change.

On the level of behavioural phenomena this situation results in a peculiar double image: on the one hand the aesthetics of populism corresponds to those symptoms which are described in the field of individual neurosis as the return of the repressed. Old, fixated conflicts and non-integrated infantile desires suddenly occur in the form of disconcerting types of strange behaviour. For people from outside these inordinate articulations are often perceived as incomprehensible, irritating or erratic. Sometimes they are even experienced as scary because they unexpectedly and uncontrollably question cultural agreements. To the same extent populists' radical and hate-filled demeanour causes aversions among fellow citizens, those individuals on the other hand appear like risible representatives of the demised. Their fellow citizens regard their proudly displayed back-

ward turns as clear signs of regression. This image of populism is underpinned by the leaders of the various movements. In their media appearances, the actors employ the simple rhetoric of invocation in a striking manner. Whether with pathetic gestures and trembling voices or blustering provocation — those actors in their mission to simplify hardly know how to use any other rhetorical figure than that of exaggeration.

Why, one wonders, do those messages work among the recipients? The attraction effect is similar to that of trash soaps, which are also able to address their mass audiences with banal stories and woodcut-like identification models. However, the well-known dictum of Karl Marx, according to which world-historical facts and persons appear twice, once as tragedy and the second time as farce, seems even more appropriate.[1]

With their outdated ideals, the revenants are no longer in tune with the globalised modernity, which demands quite different virtues: objectiveness, a sense of agreement, a desire for surprises, creativity in problem-solving, willingness to reflect on oneself, ideological distance, pluralism of identities and readiness to participate.

This perspective on populist movements, which sees in them no more than a by-product of modernisation, could allow a relaxed attitude of dispassionate observation. Revolt of their kind may be unpleasant and even entail threats arising from terrorist acts; but there may be little reason for a neurotic counter-reaction in the form of exaggerated excitement, because ultimately the fluffed-up megalomaniac fantasies are hardly more than symptoms of progressive weakening. These haters of progress will sooner or later be marginalised by the reality of the transformation processes, which seem as unstoppable as second nature.

Populism — a disease of the system?

In addition to this socio-dynamic approach, the spectre of populism must be considered from another angle. The communication strategies of simplification, playing on emotions and denying facts are currently employed in a media economy and ecology in which the behavioural disease has become a symptom of the digital society as a whole. It is a sufficiently well-known and bemoaned fact that intellectual and emotional backwardness is actually entirely compatible with the use of modern communication tools and the associated possibilities of influence. With digital communication, which operates on the one-to-many and many-to-many principles, also the populists have access to amplification systems that serve to mobilise the masses and consolidate opinions

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[1] Marx notes in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 2nd Ed., Hamburg 1869, p. 1: "Hegel remarks somewhere […] that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." Marx then continues: "And just as they [the living] seem to be occupied with revolutionising themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.", cf.: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm.

within the groups. Systemic linkage with the mainstream, which populists actually want to get away from, occurs on two levels. The first level, which is widely recognised and has been analysed by media scientists, involves theatricalisation of the political. A well-known strategy is the calculated breaking of taboos — for instance, when Nazi jargon is used deliberately or religious superiority over people of other beliefs is posited. This echoes positively within the group of followers whose feelings of mutual bonding are strengthened by a collective acclamation of the transgression. One example of this dramatisation was provided by the right-wing AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) during the German federal election campaign in 2017. A video campaign based on associative footage was broadcast on the main social media platforms, denouncing Chancellor Merkel as being responsible for Islamist terror attacks in Berlin. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper wrote: "There has probably never been such a perfidious form of negative campaigning in any German election campaign before. It breaks the unwritten rule of German politics that a minimum of decency must be preserved during campaigns."[2] This particular campaign was planned in the "so-called digital war room in the AfD's Berlin headquarters"[3] — the martial language used in the office's name is symbolic of the content and strategies that are hatched there. Excesses of this kind are registered by the established media and regarded as worthy of reporting and commenting on. This reaction is actually what the political opponents want, even though contempt for the "lying media" and "fake news" plays a central role in the populists' discourse. This suddenly produces a coalition of opposing media players, with both sides deriving benefits from co-operation of this kind. The cultural anthropologist, René Girard, would probably have called this kind of mutual indignation "mimetic contagion",[4] which contributes here to mirror-like self-referencing of the media: it seems as if there exists no outside of the media, where other behaviour patterns than mimetic rivalry are possible.

Less obvious is the second level of systemic symptoms, to which media-driven populism contributes with its communicative pathologies. The fact that the adversaries of enlightenment also take advantage of the opportunities of the Internet, of digital means of bonding and of organisation does not only demonstrate that cutting-edge technical rationality and unreasonable thinking can go hand in hand. Moreover, this nexus can be read as a sign of a general crisis: when the Internet began its rapid development in the 1990s, technology was accompanied by many discourses of hope. New types of learning and a new culture of knowledge and science were expected,[5] new types of communication and work were yearned for, liberating ways of playing with identities were hoped for, a new feminism (cyber-feminism) was devised and a new public space seemed to emerge. We only need to recall John Perry Barlo's 1996 manifesto. His "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" begins with the following impassionate prophecy:

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[2] http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/gezielte-grenzverletzungen-so-aggressiv-macht-die-afd-wahlkampf-auf-facebook-1.3664785.

[3] http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/web/bundestagswahl-2017-afd-wirft-google-sabotage-vor-a-1168618. html.

[4] René Girard: "On War and Apocalypse" (2009), https://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/08/on-war-and-apocalypse.

[5] A belated tribute in: Michel Serres: *Thumbelina: The Culture and Technology of Millennials*, London, New York 2015.

"Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear."[6]

The entire text comprises the themes of contrarianism and being different, which are essentially underpinned by anti-state ideals and a natural-law approach to coexistence in society. It is probably part of the tragedy of history that it was not least this cyber-anarchism that opened the floodgates to cold economic liberalism — and a drastic loss of utopian ideals:

- The great area of freedom provided by cyberspace was feudalised by the Silicon Valley corporations.
- Intelligence services added digital eavesdropping functions to the Internet, which now spy on all Internet users regardless of legal boundaries, making them into potential suspects.
- The cultural industry is doing everything it can to turning users into permanent consumers by offering non-stop entertainment.
- In its measures, politics primarily follows the emergency calls from the business sector, which is only interested in concerns serving instrumental rationality.
- Educational researchers are complaining about the erosion of basic cultural skills such as text comprehension, correct spelling and writing, and free speech.
- And, in the end, exclusive communication cultures have emerged which do not engage in the "great and gathering conversation" that Barlow described but, instead, in the narrowing of the mind.

Meanwhile, an overall pessimism accompanies the development of the Internet, which radiates into the entire culture as an emotional climate. Within this overall picture, the media policy of populists should be seen as a core trend which combines several dark themes of a public without rules: being able to say anything is mutating into a gesture of smugness, opinions are presented as a discourse of absolute truths, excitement is supplanting associative intellectuality and provocation serves to activate resentment instead of triggering the expansion of horizons.

Realism in the plural

It goes without saying that the Internet continues to function as a space of creation, inventiveness and great expressiveness — in other words, a key tool for the future and not just a toy for "the last man". The symbolic culture of the Internet, however, is of paradoxical nature that arises from the

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[6] https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence.

high concentration of symbolic offerings and its ubiquitous presence in everyday life. The fact that thereby opportunities and risks cannot be separated shall be briefly outlined as follows.

As far back as 1976, the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard formulated a theory that, although it has since fallen out of fashion, is useful as an analytical tool. Presented in theoretical essay-like form, this concept states that the saturation of the world with media generates a kind of hyperrealism under which the real disappears. Whereas 18th- and 19th-century artistic realism could still believe in the codification of reality and lived from the tension between representation and the represented, Baudrillard posits that "the hyperreal represents a much more advanced phase insofar as it effaces the contradiction of the real and the imaginary. Irreality no longer belongs to the dream or the phantasm, to a beyond or a hidden interiority, but to *the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself.*"[7] Baudrillard equates media representations with hallucinations, with an aesthetic impressiveness and immediateness that cannot be understood or interpreted. What is being formulated here — long before the digitisation of texts, images and films and long before the introduction of mobile devices with which modern human beings keep constantly in touch — sounds at first like simple criticism of the media. To avoid misunderstandings: Baudrillard is not referring to what nowadays is called fake news or information warfare, i.e. deliberate disinformation and calculated opinion-shaping. Of course, facts can be researched and can be verified or falsified. *Realism* always means that a conception of reality is created through processes involving the selection, combination and interpretation of information. Every culture is based on these processes, but they are, however, directed differently. While they involve generally binding belief or knowledge systems in homogeneous societies, a different problem arises in the anarchy of an exploding information culture. As a result, both of politics being practically reduced to a repair service and a widespread tendency to avoid conveying civilising values and also of the equality and individualisation of religions or their substitutes, effective codification systems are losing their influence. What conservatives bemoan as a loss is, however, the precondition for freedom. This freedom does nevertheless involve virtually constant stress in terms of the need for interpretation: reality concepts have to be developed from the potentially endless symbolic material available. Populists also use the available reservoir of material to build and justify their dogmas. In their case, however, there is never any relativisation, scrutinising interpretation or comparison with competing ideas, either of their own volition or induced. On the contrary, the Internet as an amplifier rewards self-isolation because there is no supreme authority to weigh up the various models from a sovereign position. The problem is therefore not so much that people choose to adhere to misguided views as the use of the style of self-authorisation which embodies contempt for the other and things that do not suit them. The mythical foundations (nation, race, religion) of the discourse serve as immunisation against the contingencies of the modern era.

Traditional media such as public-service television and high-quality political journalism still function as institutions providing comment within the competitive communication marketplace. But it is also true, that these media have been in crisis for some time and are hardly noticed any more by the younger generation. In keeping with Baudrillard, it can therefore be said that the Internet as an information archive is also the supply station for hallucinations and delusions. The post-modern

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[7] Jean Baudrillard: *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, London 1993, p. 72.

term, *hyperreality,* could be suitably replaced by one that is used more frequently today. Although it has a specific technical meaning, *augmented reality* is also an appropriate metaphorical expression for the new conditions here: reality is complemented and enhanced according to our discretion and liking.

In a recent conversation with the American media artist, Tony Oursler, this picture of increasing gloom and occultation was eerily confirmed. Oursler not only addresses the realities of the contemporary media in his art, he also collects artefacts from the history of phantasmagorical media.[8] Against this background, he voiced a theory of his own when asked how Donald Trump came to be elected. Referring to statistics, he pointed out that a large section of the American population still deny the theory of evolution, that a substantial number of people in the USA have significant psychological disorders or take drugs regularly and that people continue to believe in paranormal phenomena.[9] The religious colouring of politics in the USA is a further factor in this combination of circumstances, which has a particular effect: in spite of education and science, there is still a desire for the transcendental, the counterfactual, denial of reality and the esoteric. Although cause and effect cannot always be easily distinguished, it should be noted that, regardless of any technical substantiation, the media have always also produced phantoms. The disconnection of images, sounds and statements from contexts, the supertemporality of their existence and the obscurity surrounding how they are produced can give media representations a sinister aura, the effects of which may extend to hypnosis and paranoia.[10]

In spite of this analysis, it is still the case that there have rarely been such great opportunities for poetic appropriation of the world that emphasise exchanges, mutual activation, temporariness and openness as there are today. And we even can follow artists like Tony Oursler with optimism, who do highlight that the rational use of the media is only half the story.

The art of the counter-strategy

Media are more than tools to control humans, communication, or things — they ought to be handled with criticism and creativity. If we change perspective, the Internet appears as a platform for a type of artistry that is not geared to the art system, or the art market, galleries and museums, where the main focus is on cultural tastes and historical knowledge of art. On the other side, the attempts to politicise art and turn it with good intentions into a conveyor of messages — as was the case at the *Documenta 14* exhibition — also miss the actual point of art. Artists are not primarily activists or, still less, social workers. Art has traditionally evolved as a system in which the frictionless operation of words, symbols and coding is disrupted in order to question the concept of *truth*. Art is a form of reflection about the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of symbolisations. Art therefore distances

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[8] http://tonyoursler.com/imponderable-moma.
[9] A survey conducted in the UK in 2016 produced similar findings: https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/03/26/o-we-of-little-faith/.
[10] Gunnar Schmidt: "Beeinflussungsapparate. Eine paradiskursive Montage", in: Karl-Josef Pazzini, Marianne Schuller, Michael Wimmer (Eds.), *Wahn – Wissen – Institution. Undisziplinierbare Näherungen*, Bielefeld 2005, pp. 195–219.

itself from the immediacy of events, which in large sections of the information distribution sector only leads to breathless attentiveness. Art makes no advance hierarchical distinction between the insignificant and the significant. By developing unusual forms which renounce practised rhetoric and predetermined codes, art encourages questions to be asked about the boundaries of understanding and forces creativity to invent or discover means of investigation. What gets lost in the constant activism of media coverage but survives residually in art is an understanding of democracy which consists in preserving the diversity of means of expression and their relationship to reality. Jacques Rancière described this eccentric concept of democracy as follows:

"For democracy does not in itself determine any particular regime of expression. It breaks, rather, any determined logic of connection between expression and its content. The principle of democracy is not the levelling — real or assumed — of social conditions. It is not a social condition but a symbolic break: a break with a determined order of relationships between bodies and words, between ways of speaking, ways of doing and ways of being."[11]

Especially in times of dogmatic rigidification and a post-truth mood, art may have a role in countering the irrational body of emotions with heterological strategies. Whatever these strategies may be in practice, they imply a requirement for interpretation as a shaping force. This "soft" process, the probing into something and the attempts to relate the findings to oneself and the practical world, are movements of the spirit which counteract what has been considered as manifest. Those individuals diagnosed with the post-truth disease are trapped in their cosmos of apparently irrefutable signs and are at the same time absolutely convinced that their understanding of the world is right. Poetic sensibility does not mean indiscriminateness, but requires awareness that the signs are both tools *and* means of deception in one. A mere gesture of opposition proves to be worthless unless it is made clear at the same time that it is based on interpretative efforts. Policies and teaching which reduce education to learning practical skills that ensure success on the marketplace overlook the fact that world views always extend much further than the factual. Poetic processing of reality, which in principle anyone can engage in, generates symbolic forms which reveal the need for metaphysics and simultaneously enable questions to be raised here. A democratic policy would foster and encourage improvisation, translation, and discourses that leave the end open — and where should that be possible if not on Internet platforms or channels that are still to be devised? Codes in whatever shape are the software with which the machine we call "reality" is to be programmed. A new democratic culture of expressive experimentation demands models, which are available in ample quantities in modern art. Ultimately, what Joseph Beuys postulated over 30 years ago might come true: "Everyone is an artist."[12]

*Note: the opinions expressed in the background papers are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.

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[11] Jacques Rancière: *The Politics of Literature*, Cambridge 2011, p. 11.
[12] Joseph Beuys: Reden über das eigene Land: Deutschland, Speech of 20 November 1985, Münchner Kammerspiele, online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKdY397NcE8. Beuys placed the phrase in the context of his concept of social sculpture, democratic participation and creativity as the science of freedom.

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