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From post-truth to higher-truth

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ABSTRACT

The text at hand draws on my undergraduate work in 2020 in which I looked at the usage of humor in internet culture and how it was used as a countercultural strategy by the far-right online movement known as the alt-right to question established perceptions of reality. This essay argues that the rhetoric of the alt-right of the mid-2010s prepared the ground for a media environment from which the ontologies of the proliferating conspiratorial movements could flourish in 2020.

Postmodern Nihilism

In order to understand the political radicalization as well as the shift in perception of reality in various online communities, we need to look at the general social circumstances from which many of these emerge. In his book *Capitalist Realism* the cultural critic Mark Fisher depicts how neoliberal, postmodern culture gave rise to a sort of pervasive nihilism, especially among the younger generation. Writing shortly after the financial crash of 2008 and the successive bank bailouts, Fisher describes an ideological framework in which the old does not seem to die, and the future does not realize itself in its promised potential.^[1] This nihilist perspective taken by Fisher seems productive to analyze the cultural situation of the mid-end 2010s, where it became evident that political movements, like Occupy Wall street or the Arab Spring, ultimately failed to realize their goals. Fisher describes a political and cultural situation where the present collapses into a non-time of the past, the now, and the never-fulfilled promises of the future. For him it, seems like we live in “[...] a culture that is excessively nostalgic, given over to retrospection. Incapable of generating any authentic novelty.”^[2] Thus, Fisher argues, our current culture is obsessed with past histories and nostalgia. The past ideas of the future have failed, and the ideas for different futures which were

once imaginable, are now haunting our present.^[3] It feels like history does not unfold linearly anymore, rather the present emerges from all directions in a constant nowness.^[4] In this state, different cultural phenomena seem to emerge out of an enmeshed and densified hyper-dimensional sphere in which everything becomes more diffuse and individualized, yet at the same time also standardized.^[5] Writing about subcultural music within the neoliberal paradigm, Achim Szepanski and Andrzej Steinbach state that there is “an equivalence between the accelerated circulation of difference at all levels of social activity, the design of use values, symbols, habitus, etc., and at the same time their unprecedented standardization and functionalization.”^[6] Despite the apparent technological progress of recent decades and the expansion of higher education, economic inequality seems to be growing rapidly while opportunities for upward mobility are rapidly decreasing.^[7]

Subsuming any form of critique as a dulled aesthetic gesture into the fabric of the system, it feels increasingly difficult for any form of protest to influence the circumstances embedded in the unethical, dangerous, and destructive political climate of late modernity. Any critique made is appropriated by the neoliberal system and modified in a way that is emancipatory at the individual level, depriving it of any structural and material changes so that it can be integrated into a hegemonic capitalist logic.^[8] Even though the adapted system often appears to be better than previous conditions, it is precisely these appropriation mechanisms that hinder and complicate the achievement of the goals intended by the original critique, leaving the structural hierarchical powers in place and most of the time, even manifesting them. This mechanism is especially present when looking at the demands of the countercultures of the 1960s, which were appropriated by neoliberalism in a way that the proposed idealistic goals became unachievable. The revolutionary character of their demands has been reduced to mere aesthetic life choices. This all absorbing self-reflectiveness poses a problem

for real anti-capitalist structures, which now have to stand against the authoritarian and bureaucratic character of Fordist capitalism with its standardization for mass production and mass consumption as well as against the dynamic ideas of neoliberal capitalism. Ultimately, it feels like any ideological position is embedded into neoliberal hegemony in such a way that it is impossible to achieve any adequate positive results out of them. Political positions seem to be reduced to mere aesthetics in a way that makes them nothing but a narrow avenue to express one's own identity in the time of hyper individualization.^[9] It is no longer the actual content of one's action but rather the gestures with which it is performed that seem most important.

A common, comfortable reaction to this widespread state of hopelessness is either to withdraw or to lose oneself in utter nihilism and irony.^[10] As Brad Troemel states: "The constant irony I speak of does not conceal idealism but is a reactionary response to the compounding belief that political or artistic progress of any kind is unfeasible."^[11] Ideologies are no longer seen as containing an absolute truth and are therefore performed with ironic detachment. On the internet of the 2010s, this constant irony was "used as a coping mechanism for the anxiety caused by rapid cultural turn over, constant irony is the redemption of hopelessness and a lack of idealistic creativity spoken through the voice of detached coolness."^[12]

Humor as Disruption

Reflecting on one's subjective perception of reality, humor, satire, and the comical are often used as a moral compass in uncertain times. As it is a playful commentary and an examination of the prevailing cultural logic, what is considered funny and ridiculous is differentiated by the normative system of the joke's peer group. Through pointing out the absurdity of a certain social pattern, humor can reveal and question prevalent socio-cultural dynamics. It does this by

pointing towards the gesture of a prevalent action instead of being focused on the action itself. The absurdity of this action is revealed in the comical by breaking with the natural flow of the situation at hand. Playing with different understandings and perceptions of the situation, the comical establishes itself from a subjective perception of reality rather than in material reality itself and proposes that things could be absurdly different.^[13] It is amusement, through a play with rational logic and the logic of imagination. "The reasoning at which we laugh are those we know to be false, but which we might accept as true were we to hear them in a dream."^[14]

A ridiculous state of mind is going one step further. by immersing oneself in an absolute state of absentmindedness, one does not distance oneself at all from a topic but devoting oneself to it in a total ecstatic state. Thus, the ridiculous does not merely question the means of rational denotation but also finds pleasure exactly in this loss of meaning. In this state of ecstasy, there is nearly no moral standard that can be violated and no sanctions are feared for the participants. By adopting a laughably absurd position and by joyfully surrendering to this silly state, the given normative structures of the situation are called into question.^[15] This results in a feeling of total freedom from any normative rules and a disruption of any established conception of reality.^[16]

This break with any established concept of reality can also be observed in various internet subcultures of the 2010s where humor and silliness were often being used to dissolve any notion of commonly perceived truth. The nihilistic and cynical jokes were always an intensification of the moral system of the subculture in which they circulated, pushing the boundaries of accepted political positions and desensitizing the group to radical opinions. In this way, humor is used as an essential tool for reconfiguring and intensifying subjective strands in the individual's sense of the world. The intense emotional character of the humor and silliness present furthermore aligns

with the distribution and dispersion mechanisms of social media's attention economy, where emotionalizing content is gaining the most traction.

Devastating Hypermedia Spaces

“The culture industry irrigates and energizes the excited and at the same time exhausted nervous system [...]”^[17] The continuous and never-ending stream of content on digital and virtual media with its frictionless consumption infrastructure leads to an agitated “interpassivity.”^[18] The flow of endless triggers stimulates, draws all attention to itself, and overwhelms the viewing subject to the point of complete exhaustion. In the internet's space of hypermedia environments, we expose ourselves to a constant stream of fragmented affective triggers.

“The networks are built to amplify emotions, to increase user interaction.”^[19]

In this economic structure where profits are driven by engagement on the platform, arousing content has immense value as it tends to get users to be locked-in. Funny as well as edgy content completely affirms this logic of the social media spaces at hand. Focusing on the provocative and affective nature of social media content, Suhail Malik states that social media is successful because of its toxicity.^[20] According to Malik, toxic and offensive content is therefore not the exception in those spaces but complies with the norms and logic of the networks. There is a subjective intensification happening through contentious and offensive content.^[21] Especially content that polarizes the viewers is what provokes high emotional engagement and ends up being either approved or disapproved by one's reactions. This leads to more time spent on social media, which has a positive effect on the generation of data and thus on the revenues of social media companies. The platforms are designed such that, in order to stay relevant, users have to interact with content and continuously produce engaging content themselves. The social media companies are ultimately interested in the high engagement that subjective intensifications

of polarizing content provoke since they monetize via advertising, ergo via the user's attention.^[22]

Trolling and Shitposting

Jokingly playing with the affective attention mechanics has long been a ubiquitous part of various internet subcultures. One such practice that plays with the mechanics of social media networks is “shitposting”: The shitposter confirms to the stream of mostly meaningless yet affective content in an exaggerated way. Shitposting combines the bot-like tactics of spamming with dadaist absurdity. It over-identifies with the ridiculous logic of the attention economy and exaggerates it to the extreme in a game of rejection and enjoyment. By playing with the ambiguity of statements, it disrupts the situation in which it occurs and at the same time reveals the situation's habitual cultural or social mechanisms. In the times of the alt-right, shitposting, or “bullshitting,” was often used as a tactic to flood online discussion platforms with seemingly meaningless and provocative content. Alt-right “trolls” tried to provoke an emotional reaction, taking pleasure in other people's discomfort in situation they had created.^[23] This trolling was pushing for a reactionary shift in habits through a kind of mockery. In this dynamic playing with the multiplicity of meaning, fairly neutral things became provocative and offensive through posting them in a certain context. Disguising any true meaning behind a maze of irony, the alt-right troll pranksters were amused when their posted statements are taken seriously. With the claim that those who would take it seriously were themselves responsible for the turmoil, they dismissed any connotation of ethics or morals. Abstracting the posted statements completely from their effects, when accused, the provocateur said, “It's all in your mind“, which shifts the blame to the victim: “Provocation on the one who has been provoked.”^[24] In these provocations, truth is presumed to be subjectively constituted and used in a way that it can be altered by combining decontextualized facts, ideological ideas and subjectively obtained “truths” in ominous ways.

“[T]he truth of statements is no longer important. Only its effectiveness.”^[25] This “blatant contempt for truth and facts undercuts any chance of pinning any charges of lying or dishonesty”^[26] and withdraws itself from any ethical responsibility. “[W]here the liar knows the truth and respects it – he does not want to get caught in his lie – the bullshitter couldn’t care less about it. He isn’t interested in the truth, which for him is in the eye of the beholder [...] He is interested in the effect his bullshit has on his audience.”^[27] The anonymous raids of online sites by the alt-right, which took off as a prank in the community of the imageboard website 4chan, were a way of showing the power of posting by contrasting the subjective perceptions of others, provoking them and enjoying their reactions. “This kind of Fascist Dada enables one to have it both ways: as with 4chan, you can make your ‘transgressive’ statement, yet avoid responsibility for it.”^[28]

The detached humor at play in this community enabled a cover-up of sinister thoughts under its ironically posed statements. Cynical irony is not only a way of coping with the subjectively perceived detrimental situation but is furthermore a way of flirting with taboo politics as a reactionary answer to the subjective perception prevalent in those spaces where social and economic prosperity, in general, is declining. In the pursuit of transgression and provocation, positions are taken by the pranksters that blatantly violate prevailing moral systems.^[29] In these ‘jokes’, it is precisely the infringement of the prevalent morals of liberal society that is the source of enjoyment. The transgression of morality is playfully tested in memetic jokes, disguised as irony, while at the same time, radicalized political patterns are built up and reinforced.^[30] This faux irony evades any moral accountability through a proclaimed subjectiveness of reality. It is a complete disregard for the denotation of words, images, and their symbolic meaning, which tries to disrupt any established epistemological and ontological frame.

Spiritualistic Ontologies

Many of the members of the alt-right described their memetic tactics as “meme magick,” referring to the postmodernist occultism of “chaos magick.” Chaos magick is a school of thought that proclaims the flexibility of reality. The idea of chaos magick is that the outer, real world can be altered by the power of the mind and through a set of chaotic events which transfer the inner imagined world onto the real one.^[31] Chaos magick espouses magically creating reality as opposed to the phenomenological tricks of performance magic, which only alter the way reality appears. For chaos magick, truth no longer applies, and reality becomes playfully malleable to the practitioners’ own will. As one student of chaos magick writes: “chaos magick is the art forming the unformed energies of creative chaos into a pattern leading to the outcome of the magician’s desire.”^[32] Trying to prove their power, the magicians are interested in testing and redefining the boundaries of reality:

“Chaos magick works on a similar principle [as the butterfly effect]. It recognizes that the right tap at the right time in the right place can move a situation in the way it wants. Magick comes in because there is no obvious causal relation between the chaos magician’s tap and the outcome, just as there is no obvious link between a Chinese butterfly and a thunderstorm in Cheyenne.”^[33]

In the logic of chaos magick, the alt-right thought that their chaotic shitposting of memes was capable of changing real-world events. “Meme magick is when what happens in cyberspace has an effect on the ‘real’ world”^[34] Although online phenomena such as memes and pranks are part of a larger entanglement of real-life events, media, and political positions, they are certainly not a magical external force with the power to change material events simply by shitposting obscure memes.

Despite not being as involved in magical thinking as the alt-right was, it can be observed that many adherents of the German right-wing “Querdenken” movement as well as supporters of the conspiracy movement Q-Anon are immensely influenced by spiritualism. Many of the spiritual and occult ontologies of these groups claim that the body can be influenced by the pure power of the mind, enabling the possibility of spiritual self-healing through recalling unknown energies. A belief that a state of deeper consciousness exists, which can be addressed through spiritual rituals is often essential. Denying nearly any form of materialism, especially the promises of classical western medical science, the spiritualists of Querdenken and Q-Anon believe in the existence of a higher spiritual reality in the form of an Other that affects and determines reality in the same way that they claim the mind determines the body. While at an early level of radicalization, the adherents of these conspiracy ideologies insist on the multiplicity of meaning, the supposedly subjective constitution of reality, and above all, demand acceptance of the morality that follows from it. Further radicalized, they contradictorily believe that there is a transcendental Other that determines material reality and that their ideology and its morality are the only correct one. In reference to the '90s film *Matrix*, their ideology is the “red pill” that shows the painful truth of the world as it is.

Gary Lachman attributes this interest in spiritualism to the loss of meaning that accompanies postmodern neoliberal culture. According to him, the nihilism of our current time is resulting in a desire for meaning and purpose in one's life. In the loss of orientation, many have a longing to be part of a higher reality.^[35] He describes the parallel between the longing for a reality greater than oneself and the emergence of right-wing spiritualism in the context of 20th-century fascism as follows:

“We all have a need to feel that our lives are part of something larger than ourselves – every devoted football fan or pop star follower knows that – and

Hitler and Mussolini were adept at providing many people in Germany and Italy with the sense that they belonged to some larger reality beyond their everyday lives.”^[36]

The fascists of the 20th century as well as the alt-right and new right-wing movements today did not win over the masses through logical reasoning but through offering spiritual fulfilment and clear guidance in their propaganda. Belief in a higher reality or a spiritual leader gives answers to the complexity of the perpetual crisis produced by modernity. It provides a clear system of morals with tangible positions to guide one through a world full of ambivalences. It is precisely a reduction of complexity that makes these spiritualist ontologies useful for right-wing ideologies. It is no surprise then that many of the books of the 20th century spiritualistic philosophies, which were deeply intertwined with the then emerging right-wing philosophies, can be found on many reading lists of the new spiritual right today.^[37]

Conclusion

The troubling times of the 2020s COVID-19 pandemic have seen a rapid disruption of the cultural, social, and economic spheres. The sudden social isolation and an uncertain future were a fruitful breeding ground for right-wing, spiritualistic conspiracy theories. The perceived cultural decline and the fear of a possible economic collapse put many in a persistent state of anxiety. Many of those who did not grow up on the internet felt left behind by the relocalization of culture and the entire public sphere into the virtual. Focusing on sustaining economic growth even in a health crisis is an absurdity in a system where only a few are actually making a profit. The restriction of any public life not devoted to capitalist accumulation diminished the value of public communal leisure activities that usually often seem to function as compensation and thus as the meaning and purpose of life in neoliberal capitalism. Relocating these activities to toxic social media spaces has led many people to feel

even more isolated. The loss of meaning that has emerged leaves many in a place where they seek guidance in communities promising tangible answers as easy explanations for the current situation. Moreover, these communities seem to offer distinct moral ideals, rituals, and ways of expressing one's belonging. The entanglement of these real-world problems with streams of edgy content have led many to turn to reactionary ideas that promise orientation in this complex time.

Many proponents of conspiracy theories and right-wing shitposting deploy various ontologies that have devastating ethical implications as a political tactic to spread their ideologies.

In Telegram and Discord groups as well as in Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter ^[38] feeds, endless streams of reposts and original content are created that provoke certain memeified perceptions of reality. Through emotional exaggeration and entanglements of partly contradictory ideologies, a new subjectivity gets created and solidified. The hyper-mediation of reality in an endless stream of

affective content is ultimately altering the subjective perceptions of reality. While one might follow certain content producers because their content is aesthetic, humoristic, and entertaining, the individual posts build up to some sort of chaotic entanglement that solidifies a certain worldview.

We have to understand that the emergence of conspiracy and right-wing ideologies did not come by surprise; rather, they are a result of neoliberal hegemony and its appropriation of left-wing critique on a mere level of representation, enforced by an algorithmically driven attention culture. Postmodern, neoliberal culture has led to a state of perceived powerlessness and disorientation. This fuels those emerging ideologies, as they offer a sense of belonging in a world full of ambivalence. In order to deradicalize people from right-wing, conspiratorial ideologies, as well as neoliberal ideologies, the left needs to distance itself from neoliberal symbolic faux activism and expose those mechanisms that this essay has sought to describe.

FOOTNOTES

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