

Art Criticism and Judgement

Panel 9

MODERATION
ELLEN WAGNER

THOMAS EDLINGER
FLORIAN ARNOLD

What Do You Need? On the Relationship Between Empathy and Criticism

Thomas Edlinger

In his contribution *What Do You Need?*, Thomas Edlinger questions the concept of empathy with regard to its potential to promote mutual understanding in a society that can be described as either ›divided‹ or ›pluralistic‹. According to Edlinger, both the common idea of solidarity and that of empathy are, however, inconceivable without asymmetries between us and ›the others‹ within a society. While one generally demonstrates solidarity as an ›equal among equals‹, empathy often implicitly assumes a superiority of the person (often one means oneself) who can understand everything – or better: who believes him or herself capable of this.

Would it not instead be better to sharpen the awareness of what one cannot understand about the other on the one hand, and of what one does not want to understand about one's own position on the other? Taking Harun Farocki's short film *Nicht löschesbares Feuer* (The Inextinguishable Fire, 1969) as his point of departure, which aesthetically allows, not so much mere compassion, as – in line with Jacques Rancière – ›passions‹ to develop that are ›not adapted‹ to the situation described,¹ Edlinger attempts to open up ›common sense‹ to a form of dealing with one another which, as a temporary, mutable agreement on a basis of communication within a heterogeneous multitude, remains critical of its own criteria and limits.

»Design and Punishment« – Criticism of Design in the Age of Web-Formatted Real Satire

Florian Arnold

While Edlinger is concerned with the idea of focusing less on one's own and the other's ›entitlement‹ and more on the differing and mutable needs within a society, Arnold practices a failure on himself as an ›aesthetic snob‹, which he allows himself to play out within the framework of a self-experiment; to – in a certain sense – use himself as an example.

On the basis of the ZDF mini-series *Design und Strafe* (Design and Punishment, 2019), which he co-conceived (torn to microscopic pieces even in design circles) and thus using the ›example of himself‹, the philosopher and design theorist analyses satire as the post-critical complacency of a media personality who fails because of the perfection of the acting out of real satire. Dealing side blows at the awe of ›author design‹, or kitsch fantasies from a furniture discounter, throughout the series Arnold lashes out at

1 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* [1st ed. 2008], trans. Gregory Elliott, London/New York, 2009, p. 70.

design objects that fail to be future-orientated or emancipatory. But where does this criticism itself, which risks being issued purely out of habit, actually wish to lead?

Satire, as jocular admonition or as bitter mockery, distances itself from its subject. It can – as Arnold explains on the basis on Friedrich Schiller – make the ideal of human behaviour appear negative by showing how reality fails as a result of this. Today however, Arnold sees the distance as being tipped into a pleasurable involvement in the spectacle of a reality that is always ahead of it and which it can only emulate.

Thomas Edlinger

Today, we are those »who no longer know what the hierarchy for our ›we‹ is«, writes Tristan Garcia.¹ In the past, people still believed in affiliations from which they could not escape: blood, genes, gender, family, nation, religion. Today, the forms of the once natural identity are seen as mutable and contingent. The liquefaction of identities leads to the insight that there can no longer be a ›we‹ that can claim universal validity as a group identity. Every ›we‹ is particular and must always be founded anew.

In his novel *The Book of Strange New Things*, Michael Faber plays through the conflict between the smallest group of ›us‹ and the boundless universalism of religion. A happily married pastor is sent on a missionary tour to a foreign planet. The message of Christ is to extend to all creation, including extra-terrestrial life, while at home in dystopian darkened Britain, the lights slowly go out, and love at a distance threatens to wither. Which ›we‹ is now stronger? The fading, exclusive bond with a person, whose company you have lost? Or a loose ›we‹, that arises from an uninhibited fascination for the foreign, for the grateful, exoticised alien without Christian religion?

Society is a paradoxical construction, it knows no outside, despite the fact that it creates outsiders. Society does not yet exist – the communists say in 1917 – only a deformed system of rule known as class society. There is no society *at all*, says Margret Thatcher, only individuals and families. Society *no longer* exists, say many sociologists today. Let us take the monstrous concept of society as a makeshift way of understanding it as a cohesion that is as functional as it is mutable, and which today is threatened more than ever by the termination of the social contract. In many cases, society appears to be divided; it is eroding, say the pessimists. To put it more positively, it is plural, polyphonic, and full of contradictions.

Against this dichotomy, objections are formed which can take on contradictory forms. On the one hand, there is good old criticism; criticism that divides, and criticism of the division itself. Although more recent emancipatory, sociological models propose anti-hierarchical feedback between criticism and the criticised as a social practice of mutual and equal listening, criticism is usually an undertaking that places a privileged distance between itself and the object. This form of social criticism has existed for a very long time and has apparently not been able to reduce the division of society. Perhaps it has even, in the form of identity-political overload, promoted a victim-narcissistic form of hypercriticism which above all emphasises what separates and problematises what is common. It is also because of this effect of social criticism that the appeal to overcome distance, the appeal to empathy, has increased in recent years. Can empathy help to alleviate the deficits of criticism?

1 Tristan Garcia, *Wir*, Berlin 2018, trans. Ulrich Kunzmann.

At the very latest, since one began talking about a *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture), one often hears: we must learn to empathise with the suffering and, more generally, with the perspectives of others. Ex-US President Barack Obama put his government programme at the service of empathy – at least rhetorically. In a speech in 2006, and that is to say before his election as US president in 2008, he considered the fight against an empathy deficit, which he lamented, to be more urgent than the mitigation of the fiscal deficit.

Perhaps it should and must be remembered at this point that the call for empathy circulating in Western countries today, generally refers to an emotional service, the provision of which presupposes a privileged social status. The reference to the importance of empathy as a ›social sweetener‹ is based on the inequality between those who give empathy and those who receive it.

Harun Farocki wrote in a text about empathy: »This word belonged to the counter-party. I had learned from Brecht not to gawk so romantically«. In his famous film *Nicht löschesbares Feuer* (The Inextinguishable Fire) about the complicity of a society based on the division of labour in the horrors of the Vietnam War, he asks about the meaning of drastic images. »If we show you a picture of napalm injuries, you will close your eyes«, the young Farocki says into the camera. Shortly afterwards, he stubs the burning cigarette out on his naked left forearm without batting an eyelid: »A cigarette burns at about 400 degrees.« The burn wound becomes visible. »Napalm burns at about 3,000 degrees.«

What happens to the viewer in the moment when Farocki attempts to rouse him or her to resistance? The empathy is transformed into an insight that leads to one becoming at odds with oneself. This promises more than the effective hit of good intentions – the consternation. Farocki's scene corresponds more to a body hit, which transmits an impression of reality via media technology.

Indeed, the added value of the extra-artistic, documented reality plays a decisive role in today's media art and culture. Media replaces the (often laborious and failing) work on empathy with the fiction of immediate experience. »Smack in the middle instead of just standing on the sidelines« is the advertising slogan of a private German television station. The difference between I and you become blurred in the media greed for proximity, identification, and authenticity. As a result, the subjective camera not only wobbles through gamified films and virtual reality animations, it is also booming in pornography and in the DIY journalism of smartphones and GoPro cameras.

New branches of research, such as affective computing and emotional decoding, assist in the exploitation of empathy. They attempt to make emotions that have not yet been decoded clearly readable and controllable. They are part of an algorithmic offensive that feeds empathy into a self-learning feedback system. Tomorrow's cybernetic buying recommendations may no longer say it out loud, but they do whisper it in other places: ›If that controls you, then perhaps this one also controls you.‹ Empathy becomes another word for the control society's access to individuals and groups in the perspective of private and state data mining.

Back to Farocki's avant-garde reference to empathy. Farocki's shock therapy was triggered by something that was once called solidarity-based criticism. In other words, a



Fig. 27: Harun Farocki, *Inextinguishable Fire*, 1969

criticism that thinks equality in an internationalist way and derives the necessity of action from this; an empathetic criticism that does not understand worldliness as a source of emotion but as an entanglement in relationships; which starts from the vulnerability of you and me and would perhaps today include the emotions of the dog on the one hand and the forest on the other.

Solidarity beyond interest groups is also coming back into fashion in the cultural sector. The 2019 Unsound Festival in Kraków, which has just opened, has taken this as its leitmotif.

Heinz Bude has recently argued for a renaissance of this resource of the social, which poses a crucial question that cannot be answered by the compensatory services of the state.

According to Bude, solidarity does not ask what is just, what is owed to one, and what has become a problem itself in its insistence on acquired privileges; solidarity, as Bude understands it, has something to do with Christian charity. It asks: ›What do you need?‹ And it does not expect a fair exchange for this. That sounds generous, but also somewhat unrealistic. For where is this solidarity (which one can only wish for but can hardly demand) supposed to get its political impetus? Who is inciting it, who is rewarding it, who is compensating for the unreasonable demands it makes? Is there, as studies on the non-rewarding helpfulness of small children suggest, an anthropological constant, a

social heat accumulator called solidarity, which is always in operation and only runs better or worse? Or is solidarity subject to the contingency of socio-psychological conditions, which, on the one hand, could homogenise a society against all internal upheavals (as in the post-war period up to the generation of reconstruction), or conversely, since the 1980s – in the course of the fetishisation of the personal choice of everything and everyone – could de-solidarise it to such an extent that the appeal to solidarity sounds like social kitsch? Or is solidarity increasingly turning from a world-opening social practice into an exclusive, national-conservative project that limits aid to the fiction of those close to me, to the people, to the community, to the street, to the family? If this is the case, the leftist figure of solidarity tilts to the right. It would strengthen the bonds of community against the social bond of society. Certainly, when the next flood disaster comes, everyone in the village, in the street, will be willing to show their support, but when the next wave of refugees comes, there will perhaps be much less people out there to see to the so-called *Willkommenskultur*. For what do we care about those we do not know and who have nothing to do with us?

Things were different in the liberation-loving Sixties. The solidarity of the left, fed by the criticism of capitalism, referred to the farthest reaches – to the civil rights movements in the USA, or to the Vietcong – and not only to women as the huge discriminated group in one's own home. But in the narrower class-struggle and economic sense, solidarity was an implication of the Marxist and also social-democratic criticism of the conditions of exploitation in the great leveller known as the factory. There, not only metals but also subjective conditions were melted down. At the time, the alloy was called the proletariat. After 1917, this would give rise to a ›new man‹. On the way there, communists had to adopt progressive self-understandings. This took place through a process that was both authoritarian and emancipatory at the same time, which, in line with Bini Adamczak, can be understood as universal masculinisation. All humans become brothers in the struggle against capital and for a world after, or in, constant revolution. But the communist brothers also consist of biological sisters and queer subject forms. The universally masculinised revolutionary body was both deficient and repressive. It missed the richness of already existing modes of existence and possibilities that lie beyond gender standardisation. Historically evolved femininities, Adamczak writes, were not available to the Russian Revolution. It was not until around 1968 that they came to be expressed (also in the momentum of a criticism of the deficits of the revolution of 1917) and prepared the ground for the expansion of identity-politically motivated claims to recognition that circulate today.

What is the proletariat today? What became of the working class? The good jobs and the bad jobs are too different today; precariously living female bicycle messengers and exploited people working under slave-like conditions in the Global South have too little in common with new self-employed people looking for a work-life balance. Not to forget the newly perceived and politically cultivated racial and cultural differences that turn former workers or middle-class women into ›white trash‹ or Muslims.

If the desire for solidarity wishes to be heard again today it must do justice to the roughly outlined pluralisation of social conditions and subject formations. This in turn presupposes, first that the criticism of false universalism is understood and accepted, and second, that this criticism does not become a trench war between the correct and most correct attitudes. This cannot be taken for granted – on the contrary.

For one could almost get the impression that it is precisely the progress of criticism of criticism that has led to a point where even the last certainties regarding the possibilities of critical behaviour, as Horkheimer once called it, are dissolving – a maelstrom that descends into a bottomless abyss. Walter Benjamin spoke of the dialectician who feels the wind of history in his sails. These sails were the terms that one only had to set right. Today, those who wish to get away set out with sails full of holes. Does this mean that it is better not to leave the harbour at all? Is criticism in fact a 'misery', or even being 'at one's wits' end'?

Normatively, criticism – strictly speaking – has a critical meaning only as a self-referential term. Criticism must be critical of itself, otherwise it is not criticism. It is, however, not clear which desired states criticism is actually aimed at; it is a matter of negotiation. Justice, equality, the prevention of exclusion and the recognition of all are often called normative perspectives. In principle, however, social criticism can of course also be aimed at ethnic identity or the re-establishment of the order of classes, although it may well share some leftist criticism of the experience of alienation in the modern era. Even the IS militia implicitly formulates a criticism of societies which, while horrified by their actions, are themselves largely indebted to the resentments of the holy warriors against the capitalist, corrupt, and cynical West. Where criticism is headed is therefore never clear from the outset.

Also, the more clearly such reactionary forms of criticism become apparent, the more the trust in the possibilities of a master narrative known as criticism tends to diminish. There is, however, no escape from being at the mercy of the tentacles of criticism, if only because criticism is a procedure that observes the results of an observation of the world, and at the same time becomes an object of observation itself. What matters much more is a better understanding of the tilting moments of criticism.

Post-critical forms of life, art, and thought have taken a stand against the deficits of criticism. Letting oneself drift, being decentred, turning night into day, for example – or isolating oneself, confirming oneself in bubbles and safe spaces. In art, the immersion boom provides a media-technical indication of criticism's loss of confidence. In addition, in the course of global art, generally binding criteria from the front and back, progressive and affirmative, are disappearing. There is not one ideal approach to criticism. As soon as criticism in art becomes recognisable and normatively calculable as a criticality procedure, it becomes threatened by devaluation – and vice versa.

The negation form of the next society, writes Dirk Baecker, is no longer the destruction or the *tabula rasa* of everything that has gone before – in a radical case, even negative utopia. Both procedures, destruction and utopia, once inherited the dwindling confidence in the improvability of the world through criticism, for criticism was the demo-

cratic promise of a functionally differentiated society. Anyone and everyone can criticise anything, because the world is a world of interpretations of texts and speeches that are potentially accessible to everyone. Resentment eludes the penalisation methods and control mechanisms of digitally upgraded criticism. It slips away and thrives. Resentment inherits the silence of the majority that is no longer silent. It cannot be critically re-educated or even controlled. It changes, just as an affectively charged network constantly creates new condensations without being dependent on one part alone.

Are there also productive, not *a priori*, politically contestable discourses that are associated with the uncanny power of resentment?

In a joint text with Alan O'Shea, the cultural studies pioneer Stuart Hall – in defence of the struggle for cultural hegemony once so impressively described by Antonio Gramsci – cites a few more examples of the ambivalence of common sense, which is usually flatly despised by critics. Common sense, in Great Britain for example, is angry about the barbarity of the Sharia, but at the same time shows understanding for the Old Testament vengeance logic of »an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth«. Similarly, it is also brought into play by people who are themselves dependent on state support vis à vis other underprivileged people, who they denounce as social parasites. Furthermore, common sense also wants the world to be fair, but does not find the unequal treatment of nationals and migrants in any way unjust. Heroically, it upholds the freedom of the individual, but at the same time complains about the fear-laden lack of freedom which results from the loss of social security as well as material impoverishment. Similarly, it is outraged at the greed of real estate speculators and the salaries of company directors but stoically elects those political parties that will most certainly never change anything about it. The criticism of ideology has always tried to tear off the mask of the necessarily false consciousness behind it and make the contradictions visible. Masks and veiled contradictions usually win at the ballot box.

Yet despite its latent conservatism, common sense is not a social law of nature but rather a historically variable construction. Its essence is nowhere to be found in reality, however diligently one may refer to it. Nor is it necessarily identical with the leaden corset of the majority society. There are almost euphoric references to it in leftist criticism – namely whenever, in the name of common sense, a minority concern or an emancipatory movement makes itself heard. Common sense then mutates into an expression of self-organised resistance against domination, which takes into account the heterogeneity of the struggles beyond the schematism of class struggles. In its variegation, writes Tim Stüttgen, referring to the film theorist Kara Keeling, the blaxploitation cinema of the 1970s represents the imaginary resource for a necessary Black common sense, a cinema that can be celebrated and with which the community can identify. Perhaps such forms of joyful occupation also represent a productive, historical point of friction for all those entitled positions that are categorised under the heading of Afro-pessimism.

A bold, open-ended, common-sense referentiality might be understood as an opening that could soften the frontline position of imagined proximity in the mode of empathy, and educated distance in the mode of criticism. A practice that could counter the alarmism of the constant deterioration of bad conditions with something that would

be neither elitist nor under-complex. A practice that would be close enough to touch, and far enough away not to get lost in the blindness of identification. Perhaps there would appear on the horizon something that could be called a new form of solidarity; a solidarity which looks at the damage and experiences of injustice worthy of criticism as a whole, and which can provide provisional answers to the always unresolved and inconclusive question: »What do you need?« Perhaps the *Fridays for Future* movement, for example, could initiate such common sense shifts, or can already be understood as their expression. In this case, the question of »What do you need?« would be extended to a damaged planet. The question would then aim at a solidarity that only knows participants.



Fig. 28: Harun Farocki, *Inextinguishable Fire*, 1969

Translation: Gérard A. Goodrow

Florian Arnold

Some criticism formats are ultimately more serious than one would prefer, especially the critic himself. The satirist – in contrast to the ›classical‹ critic – hardly sees himself as being above his subjects, especially today, as he generally has to be involved in some way himself. Some facts can only be exposed by exposing oneself with them. Martin Sonneborn's critical outbursts during his term of office as an elected member of the European Parliament have, in the meantime, become infamous. Here, satire seems to have completely merged with its counterpart, and ironic mimicry has become cynical mimesis – a transition that was still recognisable on one of the most eloquent election campaign posters since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, before – due to the election victory of the party *Die Partei* – the campaign came to a close and the posters disappeared. On the occasion of the German federal elections in 2013, for example, it was written in white letters on a red background: »*Inhalte überwinden!*« (Overcome Contents!); and what was affected by this turned out in retrospect to be not only a ›political‹ change of direction towards populism but also a ›satirical‹ one – but who could fault Sonneborn for keeping his election promise by simply feathering his own nest?

Nevertheless, a bitter aftertaste remains. Is it permissible to deal with political content in such a way that it becomes a mere formality of one's own advancement? Can one even speak of political satire in this context? Or have such satire politics already crossed a border beyond which satire and reality become indistinguishable? In the following, the aim will be to provide an answer to these questions, albeit an all too ambiguous and ultimately unsatisfactory one. But as one might expect, this has been part of the satirist's business ever since he sold himself as such.

What was satire?

With regard to the history of the term, the origins of satire begin with cheating, or more precisely, an ›etymological cheating‹ which manifested itself in the approximative spelling of ›satyr‹. For a long time one believed that, in the Western context, satire was derived from the satyr plays of Attic theatre; and did these always drunken and lustful hybrid creatures as companions of Dionysus not already reveal something about the dual nature of satire, oscillating between salacious risibility, cryptic subtlety, and parodistically pointed polemics? No, the term »satire«, which is not only common in English, can be traced back to the Latin *satira*, *satira lanx* (›bowl filled with fruit‹) and thus offers a colourful mixture of all sorts of things rather than the desired double meaning. This is accompanied by the fact that it was not the Greeks but in this case the Romans, who can be attributed with the invention of satire. Or in the proud words of Quintilian: »*Satura quidem tota nostra est*«¹ (›At least satire is completely ours‹).

Without wanting to delve into the history of concepts to such an extent that the entire history of the genre is also discussed here, two classic forms of satire can be

1 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, X, p. 1.

named alongside the founder figures. Whereas one form, the *Horatian*, is based more on a playfully ironic reminder of human vices – as expressed in an exemplary manner in Horace's *Sermones I, 1, 24*: »*Quamquam ridentem ridentem dicere verum quid vetat*« (»What forbids a laughing man from telling the truth?«) – the other, the *Juvenalian*, indulges in scourging, abysmal mockery of the world, culminating in Juvenal's verse from *Satires I, 30*: »*Difficile est saturam non scribere*« (»It is difficult not to write satire«). Although both forms are characterised by a certain distance to the flows of time, both also bear witness to a compassion that is at odds with their contemporaries, because it – »*O tempora, o mores!*« – wishes to claim equal standards for all. In the end, it is thus less about the individual shaping of one's own life, where it is exposed to ridicule, than about the claim to be able to take measure of an ideal of human life.

What exactly can be understood by this (also in the historical succession) is expressed exemplarily, in particular for the German-speaking world, in Friedrich Schiller's poetological reflections *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*. Here, although unnamed, an examination of the two classical forms of satire can be found, where Schiller writes: »The punishing satire obtains poetical freedom, whilst it passes over into the sublime; laughing satire receives poetical content, whilst it treats its theme with beauty.«²

Covered by the two basic aesthetic concepts of the eighteenth century, satire enters into an idealistic discourse by even expanding the front line in relation to reality. Drawn out of his reserve, the modern, sentimental satirist seems to be preparing an offensive which knocks the envisaged reality out of the field, as it were. The punitive aims straight through the rebuked criminal, at the sublimity of the ideal itself, as is characteristic of the concept of dignity (the intelligible character) of man in the tradition of Immanuel Kant. *Via negationis*, the actual ideal becomes visible and at the same time effective through the appalling circumstances only when satire »elevates« the reader out of the sensual lowlands and refuse into the abeyance of moral judgement, without itself falling into the compulsion character of moral preaching. Here, under the sign of a humorous sublimity, poetic and moral freedom tangent each other. In the other case of laughing satire, Schiller's concept of beauty comes into play, which he associates with the grace of the body. This time it is the awkward, ugly, clumsy foolishness that allows the sense of beauty to see itself distorted in its opposite, without taking pleasure exclusively in the vices of blasphemy. Both forms therefore, however contrary the aesthetics of the sublime and the beautiful may be, agree on the point at which the ideal should triumph over the real.

This is all well and good, but what about this ideal of satire in contemporary reality? I now come to an example of ideal satire, which can no longer be understood as uplifting or euphemistic. It may sound grotesque, but I take myself as an example.

2 Friedrich Schiller, »On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry«, in: *Friedrich Schiller Poet of Freedom*, vol. III, trans. Wolfgang Iillge and Ralf Schauerhammer (Washington, D.C. 1990), unpaginated.

What is design and what is punishment?

It is probably not completely wrong to assume that the title »Design and Punishment« already plays a satirical game with the partly hypocritical euphemisms of design, and with an, at times self-righteous sublimity of punishment – although it was not intended in advance. The fact that satire today can no longer avoid using the chosen aims of its criticism to target itself at the same time, is part of the irony of a *zeitgeist* that persistently and skilfully fails to overcome *itself*. At first glance, it seems more like a humorous, low-budget format, situated between slapstick, criticism, and infotainment; but at second glance, »Design and Punishment« presents itself as a satirical format which, above all presents the mediatised habitus of the critic as a doppelganger of the real spectator himself. In contrast to the classical satirical forms and their characteristic relationship to the recipient, here there is a transition from an indignant and amused, ultimately distanced know-it-all attitude, to a complicity of sensual endorsement or reluctant surrogate shame, whereby both are forms of inner identification, of willing or unwilling participation in the spectacle.

A few characteristics shall be singled out, which allow us to gain a further perspective with regard to the question of the power and powerlessness of the satirical. The structure is as follows: in five short episodes, selected objects are subjected to a design critique in order to be subsequently brought in various ways to – in most cases – damning justice. Even the strict division, which is also reflected in the broadcasting time, only partially guarantees a balance between sentence and execution. It is primarily the voyeuristic curiosity, which is more than satisfied, where, for example, a piece of seating furniture is set on fire after being maltreated with a chainsaw and a gun. In contrast, the judgement itself is markedly capricious, exaggerated, and apodictic and thus reminds one more of tavern buffoonery than of the search for truth. What is more, the division of roles between an aesthetic snob, who talks until he's blue in the face, and his butler who, albeit with visible pleasure, gets his hands dirty, makes use of colonialist clichés which, in the exoticism of the Japanese, who vacillates between a lust for violence and self-denial, tip over completely into something akin to caricature.

On the whole, the initial impression could arise – if one accepts that the power of criticism is presented in an absurd drastic representation of its consequences – that the commonplace talk of »scathing criticism« were to be vividly illustrated here. This may of course arouse displeasure in those who wish to understand criticism as constructive intervention. But the whole thing becomes grotesque, not only for the »victims« but also for the »perpetrators«, from that point on where the arbitrariness of the enforcement backfires on the judge (and the attendant jury). As several episodes (for example the one on the Fiat Multipla) clearly reveal, it is ultimately not at all the critic's verdict that prompts the plump execution or, conversely, tempers »justice« with mercy, but rather a direction that is invisible to both protagonists and viewers, which operates and rules according to a prescribed script. In other words: the improvised criticism is not only transparently staged but is ultimately a pale strategy of legitimisation for a self-righteous and autocratic spectacle, which is laid out in advance like a show trial (only this time on public television) without any higher purpose (about which all ideologists at least still lied to themselves).

So what is all this about?

The criticism of criticism of criticism...

What the public criticism of this format has in common is a certain astonishment, a kind of shaking of the head in the face of an orgy of destruction and waste (not least of taxpayers' money, as is repeatedly emphasised), which only rarely gets around to calling a spade a spade and calling what is actually problematic about the format by its name, namely as a satire on the brink of *hate speech*. Instead, there is an ironically distanced tone on the part of the critics, which seems to be in a kind of competition with the format, as if it were a matter of going one better (which the format admittedly invites) and thereby continuing to make reality of what one at the same time rebukes for moral or other reasons.

Only one thing seems clear, as a Facebook post on the fringes of the debate puts it in a nutshell: »Satire must unfortunately [why of all things »unfortunately«? FA] also face the question as to whether the contribution is suitable for motivating viewers to have a positive mental reaction. If this fails, then we are dealing at best with slapstick«. But maybe this is precisely the crux of the matter; that is to say, maybe, exactly here, one still does not sense enough cynicism, that perceptive faculty and manner of dealing that is indispensable for every satirist when it comes to finding the punch lines, although igniting these may require something else.

There is nothing directly positive about satire; at most *via negationis*, as we have already established with Schiller, a position can be taken beyond the circumstances described, if it is not to lead to lame-punchline excitement for what is good, true and beautiful. This is particularly valid for the true person of the satirist of today, as can be read beautifully in Kurt Tucholsky's credulous assertion: »Satire is a thoroughly positive thing. Nowhere do those lacking character betray themselves quicker than here, nowhere does he show himself swifter, that tomfool without a conscience, one who attacks this today and that tomorrow«. ³ Should one pat oneself on the shoulder? Or is it just that, here, with Tucholsky, that which was already a moral thorn in our side with regard to his predecessor returns – moral cockiness in the midst of conjured up or self-imagined libertinisms?

On the other hand, the positive, in the sense of the edifying, has been put up for discussion since the late eighteenth century. Instead, it is a romantic irony that hovers over an abyss of negativity, of not-this-and-not-that, and this irony is existential rather than moral. One could also say that beauty and grandeur are replaced by a mixture of the two; satire is, in one, satire of these basic categories themselves, in that irony loses itself in its own infinity, in the incessant reflection of its self-reflection and self-criticism, ultimately in its own groundlessness, which not only makes it increasingly questionable, but which made it questionable in the first place. In other words, satire becomes the grotesque – the spoiled brother of slapstick.

3 Ignaz Wrobel [Kurt Tucholsky], »Was darf Satire?«, in: *Berliner Tageblatt*, 27 January 1919; english translation available online at: <http://kurttucholsky.blogspot.com/2006/02/was-darf-die-satire.html> [last visit on 26 November 2020].

What seems to me to strike the right note, more than Tucholsky's self-righteousness directed at the religious public, is Friedrich Nietzsche's admission that he himself no longer knew whether he was dynamite or a *Hanswurst* (clown):

»I am not a man, I am dynamite. And with it all there is nought of the founder of a religion in me. [...] I require no ›believers‹; it is my opinion that I am too full of malice to believe even in myself; I never address myself to masses. I am horribly frightened that one day I shall be pronounced ›holy.‹ [...] I refuse to be a saint; I would rather be a clown. Maybe I am a clown. And I am notwithstanding, or rather not notwithstanding, the mouthpiece of truth; for nothing more blown-out with falsehood has ever existed, than a saint.«⁴

Nietzsche's confession – already marked by features of ›madness‹ – one again takes the ›*Hanswurstiaden*‹ (farces) seriously, which have been part of the canon of the genre since Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*. These are ultimately farces of criticism, which only ignite where the critic blows himself up with them. It is slapstick with clichés, a delusional competence for everything and everyone, while at the same time making a pretext of ignorance, a (self-)caricature as coquetry with the irony of history, finally and on the whole one's own petty bourgeois careerism as a boarder of the *Zeitgeist*, which hardly allows the satirist to look in the mirror without shame and alienation. The only ›consolation‹ here is the insight that he is not the only one, and yet he sees himself fighting a losing battle as the last moralist, who, in view of his own success with the others, will eventually lay down his arms.

»What may satire do? Everything.«⁵ But what, finally, is it *capable* of doing? – Nothing! – For there is only one *Hanswurstiade*, which is at the same time and indeed real dynamite: reality itself.

What is real satire?

The simplest answer should come as no surprise: Trump. In this person, everything comes together that can be imagined in terms of grotesque behaviour in the highest offices. Here, the jester seems to have been made king, and the whole thing is topped by the jester's cap in that this jester has always considered his cap to be a crown (when, in fact, it is only a toupee). Yes, perhaps even more; is Donald the saint who shows satire the way to self-redemption, even its redeemer in person? One could at least think so, if one observes the incredulous doubts, challenges, and accusations that accumulate daily in the countless testimonies of his critics, the still hesitant discipleship of a doubting Thomas, who does not want to admit it, but finally comes to understand that reality has already become a fool's kingdom on earth. Criticism of this real satire has fizzled out (what more can be critically investigated with regard to this revelation?) and at the same time has

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche. Volume Seventeen: Ecce Homo*, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (New York 1911), p. 131.

5 The closing lines of Tucholsky's *Was darf Satire?*.

been resurrected as a fascinated and astonished – and herein miracle-believing – prayer of every single word that passes over the lips of this proclaimer of self-deprecating pride; this divine son of rich simplicity. Why criticise Donald's real satirical majesty, instead of simply emulating him and doing the same? And it is done.

When one subsequently recognises this satirical conversion, the relationship between the kingdom of heaven and earthly life of satire presented itself with Tucholsky and Schiller as follows: »The satirist is an offended idealist: he wants the world to be good, it is bad, and now he runs up against the bad«,⁶ – »In satire the real as imperfection is opposed to the ideal, considered as the highest reality«. ⁷ The good news for satire and, at the same time, its deliverance from all the evil of resentment, blasphemy, and temptation is, in contrast, in real satire, the ideal as luxury is opposed to the real as the lowest ideal.

In order to assert the dignity of both the critic and the reader, reality is no longer allowed to fail due to the ideal, but conversely, the ideal fails because of reality and with it the critic or satirist as an ideal role model of mature opinion making. He sees himself, as well as his luxury of pharisaic-intellectualistic petty criticism, exposed to the sin of pride and finds refuge where he no longer wishes to cling to the superstition that the heavenly kingdom of satire is still ahead of us, paradoxically but logically only in the poverty of the spirit...

... And there he stands in front of the audience, as a patriarchal orator in the carnival of opinion, as just another jester among many who take themselves too seriously. Self-parodic opinion-forming and judgement processes range from casting shows of all kinds to the latest tribunals in the Levant. Be it in the gossip groups of the social media, or in the pathos of indignation on paper, the *Hanswurste* practice their critical antics everywhere, all of them finally united in the zealotry of a new faith, the unswerving belief in themselves and their own *confirmation bias*.

Who would want to be left out? Is the satirist doing something else? Can he want to do something else? – In the words of Martin Sonneborn: »What we do is easier. We work destructively. It's fun, it's amusing, and it has to be done«. ⁸ Perhaps this is still the only viable policy of satire, a *politique du pire*, which does not once again satirically and critically pull the *cacocratie* »through the cocoa« (as the Germans say) and thus make it sweeter, but which ensures in the easiest way that one ultimately gets sick of both it and reality. Because you may or may not laugh, but the real satirical point is that politics today needs one thing more than anything else: politicians. (Ignition)

Translation: Gérard A. Goodrow

6 Tucholsky 1919 (see note 3).

7 Friedrich Schiller, »Satirical Poetry«, in: idem., *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays* (Redditch, Worcestershire, 2013), pp. 393–401, here p. 393.

8 Martin Sonneborn, in the interview conducted by Cornelius Pollmer: »Das Vergnügen quietscht«, in: *Süddeutschen Zeitung*, 5 October 2013 [translated].

Moderator Ellen Wagner

Ellen Wagner

From different social and media-critical perspectives, Thomas Edlinger and Florian Arnold approached the question of how too much proximity or, conversely, too much distance to the objects, as well as to one's own actions and context, can have an effect on criticism. Coming from the fields of social and design criticism respectively, both lecturers invited the audience to participate in a reflection ›between the disciplines‹, which also allowed new views on the genre of art criticism.

Art criticism has long since found itself in ›survival mode‹. In a digitally saturated media landscape of divided audiences and an ›overkill‹ of critical products (Florian Arnold), it is becoming increasingly difficult for critics to reach their addressees – or even anyone, for that matter; to ›muddle through‹ with the next text, until the deadline, until a reader's reaction takes up all the energy that is so urgently needed to reflect on the situation and function of art criticism as such. Is art criticism increasingly becoming ›writing about art‹? And if so, how can it assert itself without wearing itself out in a grimly proclaimed battle for the ›survival of the fittest‹?

Moreover, in a world where ideological positions flow into one another, and knowledge and discourses increasingly spread ›virally‹ in affectively charged atmospheres, art per se, with its ambiguities, offers a contentious, discussion-laden field – fortunately, it should be added. But hardened and inscrutable attitudes of hyper or post-criticism, of intransigence and offensive indifference, obscure how much involvement and how much distance from the issue is at stake among those involved – that is to say, how to enter into a discussion.

In art criticism, the dilemma of the protagonists' entanglement in the system is a sore point. How much side-line activity can criticism tolerate? What happens to its postulated autonomy if the precariousness of writing, which is poorly paid or at times only paid in the currency of ›visibility‹, makes it subordinate to other ›bread and butter jobs‹, which in turn require greater involvement in the events and their institutions?

But also: how much criticism is possible in order not to surreptitiously cut into the meat of one's own cause and peer group, as Sabeth Buchmann remarked in the panel discussion, by means of a differentiated – in individual aspects also problematising – examination of certain artistic works, such as feminist approaches?

The post-critical restraint with unambiguous judgments and classifications can appear as an (un)conscious protective mechanism for artists and critics, in order not to narrow their own scope of action in an environment in which each has always been interwoven with the other. Similarly, the overshooting of a distanced irony, which seems to fit in almost everywhere in the media, can leave a back door open for the ›not meant to be taken seriously‹. The attempt to always address several markets, such as discourses and networks, often leads to attitudes being differentiated rather than questioned by other participants in the discourse, and, in the worst case, to being silenced rather than being taken further (Sabeth Buchmann).

Whether only the courage to express oneself clearly can help one out of this situation is hard to say, in view of the vagueness, which, especially in the aesthetic field, is also indispensable as a productive factor. The attempt to fictionalise one's own role as a critic, to experiment with points of view, and to allow oneself to change one's mind while writing,

might offer another opportunity. As an ›exercise in empathy‹, of an artistically attempted criticism, against an art that always feels called upon to be ›critical‹, this attempt could at least lead to unexpected proximities and distances that open up different paths for art and criticism than those of a mutual featuring.

Frida Sandström

You talked a lot about how to write or how we can use the platforms on and for which we work. I would like to add a quote from the *Comité invisible*, a group of writers and thinkers in France who, in 2017 published a book titled *Maintenant* (Now). There, they write that the exchange value of language has approached zero – and yet we continue to write. We do this because there is another way of using language. One can talk about life, or, from the perspective of life, one can talk about conflicts; or from the midst of conflicts themselves, and I think that this material conception, or even criticism of where we write from, is essential, also in this space, with regard to all the contributors who are here. From my perspective, this is much more crucial than evaluating or meta-criticising what has already been written.

Sabeth Buchmann

If you look at the history of criticism, there is precisely this field of tension between empathy and criticism. Look at someone like Denis Diderot, who to a certain extent always fictionalised his own role as a critic in order to include this very field of tension in his work, meaning that you have to show total solidarity with something in order to be able to criticise it at all. For me, however, the question also arises for your [Thomas Edlinger] proposal to reformulate solidarity-based criticism, whether, where identity politics interfere with it, forms might not also emerge that ›kill‹ precisely this tension, where solidarity again undermines the possibility of criticism in the sense that you cannot, for example, argue against a member of your own peer group. If I were to criticise the work of a feminist artist, for example, I would always have to face the criticism that I am thereby also criticising feminism or the representation of women in art – and right now, cases like this are steadily increasing in the social media.

Thomas Edlinger

It's good that you say that. It is indeed something that, in my view, has increased greatly, and where a tipping point of the desirable effects of criticism lurks – which can lead precisely to the fact that an originally emancipatively understood multiplication of forms of representation and of participation, can lead to something, originally conceived together, becoming silent rather than just differentiated. I have no answer now as to how one can get out of this dynamic, because in fact this would also mean in part that one would remain silent in an unjustified place and allow something to be valid, which one should not actually allow to be so. At the same time, however, I believe that, in these objections – and this would be my point of criticism of this boom in objections – forms of power that have thus far been little reflected are lurking from the side where one initially assumes that powerlessness is hidden. Cultural appropriation would also be a good example of where this tilting figure – between making that which was hitherto invisible visible, and

that which was previously unheard audible – can be observed. It is not so clear, however, who is opening and closing doors, and with what form of authorisation.

Thomas Sterna

As far as the aspect of emotionalisation is concerned, I find that very positive emotions are often expressed in connection with reports about art. There are even book titles such as *The Love of Painting* [by Isabelle Graw], among others. As someone who wishes to analyse this, one is quickly treated like a cold critic. I think this is a problematic aspect, especially when the provincial critiques in particular lose all value due to their descriptive empathy, and everything becomes indistinguishable.

Thomas Edlinger

In art criticism, I think you have to insist that you are right, even against the audience. It goes without saying that the audience cannot be the criterion. But what I was talking about is social criticism rather than a great current in which forms of criticism that appear in artistic work, in hybrid forms between activism and art for example, play a role in an inverse relationship to politics – criticism as a great counter-order.

If the example of ›criticality‹ can be cited as the leading currency of a politically interested or oriented art, then that is also interesting aesthetically. What would it mean for a conception of aesthetics if criticality became a decisive yardstick? Not in the large collections, in the large forms of representation, but in other areas which I am also more involved in, it does indeed play a major role. You then have to be careful not to overestimate that this is such an important field, but I think, discursively it is. There, I would consider your objection to be justified.

Jonas Balzer

My question – addressed to Florian Arnold – is whether, in your opinion, the criticism you yourself have experienced for the *Design und Strafe* mini-series would fall within this emotionalisation of criticism described by Thomas Edlinger. Because the criticism was actually a criticism *ad personam* or even more a criticism of the form of criticism and not related to the object itself.

Florian Arnold

The problem is to be able or willing to distinguish between these in the first place. In the mediality of social media the idea is always to personalise, and in a certain sense to turn people into things, and vice versa. And that, I think, is an expression of the situation we find ourselves in, which makes it difficult for critics to navigate, to really have an address-specific effect and not simply shout what one thinks into the digital Hades of oblivion. The question is that of the effect of criticism. And then there is perhaps a manoeuvre or a strategy, to find a way through a differentiated relationship between distance and empathy that actually works.

But I would always emphasise that the essential point is the reception in this whole, and the rampant indifference, which is generated by the overkill of even critical products. I think this is a question to which one cannot give a critical answer. Perhaps it

really is a question of raising awareness, of debate, and also of deciding for it, and whether certain media are simply incapable of conveying criticism. Perhaps criticism, in the sense of Vilém Flusser, is simply a dimension of textuality, and perhaps we are living in a post-critical age, when we have long since entered an age that speaks a completely different language than that of criticism. This is where I see the problem. But perhaps it is also a philosophical meta-perspective, which no one has interest in, and which, above all, does not advance the business that lies behind it. But that is the only thing that interests me about the whole thing.

Translation: Gérard A. Goodrow