"Truth is where the funny lies"
On the Desire for Truth in Serious Times

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Abstract

What can contemporary satire tell us about the desire for truth and the political as well as the mechanisms of sense-making in a "post-truth" era? In this introduction to the special issue on the "desire for truth and the political" we sketch a number of features of an emerging and fragile regime of truth. We argue that the crumbling certainty over truth's role in democratic politics has brought about the rise of a range of agencies, devices, and ethics that aim to restore the power of truth in different ways. While fact checking, moralizing, or calls to reason mark such a desire for truth in standard political communication, we explore political satire as a more vivid approach to the relationship between truth and the political, one that works by mobilizing a range of affective and imaginative registers. Focusing on segments of The Daily Show with Trevor Noah that satirize President Trump, we see the damaged truth-democracy-arrangement unpacked in its funniest, most outrageous, and serious articulation.

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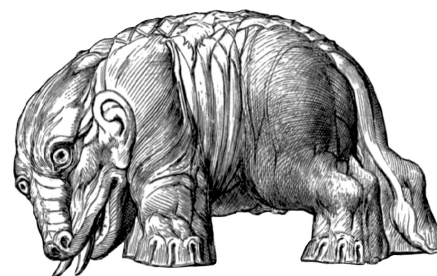
Demise of the Will to Truth

In a 2018 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Trevor Noah, the host of The Daily Show, reflected on what he has learned from his comedian mentors: "The truth is where the funny lies. Tell the truth and that's where you'll find the funniest jokes. And, so for me, in pursuing the funny I pursue the truth. And if I find the truth then the funny will marry with that."[1] If the value of truth in public spheres is vanishing in contemporary democracies, in what registers can we find the desire for truth withstanding and reinventing itself? If truth never simply *is* (or *was*, for that matter), but always needs to be established, performed and accepted, what are the mechanisms at work in these supposedly post-truth times? Could it be that some of today's most ingenious, heartfelt acts of truth come from public comedians, who by exaggerating, making unexpected and absurd connections, or by sharing their outrage, intervene in a "post truth" public landscape, and by that, re-invoke a desire for truth? Television news parody programs such as The Daily Show, The Late Night Show hosted by Stephen Colbert or John Oliver's Last Week Tonight play a peculiar role for both reflecting passionately about the current crisis of truth in political affairs and articulating new imageries through an affective range of de/familiarizations. What can contemporary satire tell us about the desire for truth and the political as well as about the mechanisms of sense-making in an era that has been diagnosed as post-truth?

Yet, what does it mean to say that we live in times of post-truth politics? And, do we? What is actually new in today's politics if we consider that lying has always been a part of political life, even considered virtuous at times (Arendt 1967; Jay 2010)? While some argue that post-truth, i.e., the counter-movement to the scientific mainstream and the political establishment alike, is as old as philosophy itself and deeply ingrained in Western intellectual thinking (Fuller 2018), others succumb to the idea that we definitely live in an era of post-truth where the boundaries between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and nonfiction are blurring, and where deceiving others has become a disgraceful habit (Keyes 2004). Novel seems to be the bluntness with which factual accuracy and truthfulness are being dismissed, if not as virtues then at least as an accepted basis of democratic consensus and dispute, often with devastating consequences: for migrants who suffer from sudden policy changes that render illegal what had previously been legal or consistent practice; for allies who can no longer trust in the observance of contracts and agreements; or for global politics when the ecological crisis is denied. This, for some, is what constitutes the real challenge: "the blindness to extinction" and, perhaps, the realization that, "[o]nce you question truth, the human, the enlightenment and the veracity of the news, *there is nothing left*" (Colebrook 2018).

We argue that the crumbling certainty over truth's role in democratic politics is not a matter of having entered an age *after* or *beyond* truth. Rather, we want to ask how we can grasp and make sense of a *regime of truth* (Foucault 2014) whose emergence we have been witnessing over the past years. What are its contours, its dynamics and rules? Truth regimes, in Foucault's sense, determine

what counts as a true or false statement, what are the rules according to which things are presented and represented, and how subjects are encouraged and constrained to perform truthfully (see Brion/Harcourt 2014, 297). Truth regimes change over historical periods—they are owed to particular epistemes (Foucault 1989) of what is seeable and sayable—and with particular cultures or styles of reasoning and debate.

Perhaps, then, we have entered a new regime of truth, for which Trump, Brexit & Co. are only the most visible symptoms. Here are some preliminary features that may delineate our current condition (and we might be forgiven to turn to these obvious examples to make our point):

First, *the self-referentiality of truth*. Trump has been called a bullshit artist for his lack of any "concern with truth" and his indifference to "how things really are" (Frankfurt 2005, 34; see also Wenzel 2016). But there is more: with Trump, we cannot be sure whether he is telling a lie or nonsense or whether we better believe what we hear—or all of the three at the same time. Uncertainty is intrinsic to this regime (see Krasmann 2018, 7), where a different form of truth emerges, one that is utterly self-referential and triumphant. Any claim or gesture is inspired not by a concern with truth but by the will to affectively evoke and entertain supremacy (Drápal et al. 2016)—and to test loyalty. It is a form of clientelism that seeks to create and foster the desire to participate in that supremacy and feeling of superiority, and that divides the population into those who deserve to be part of that supremacy and those who do not. In this sense, truth and power are complicit in new ways.[2] As Russia expert Masha Gessen reasons in an interview with Trevor Noah on a peculiar similarity in the sovereign style of Trump and Putin:

> Everything about them is different. But there are certain things that I think are characteristic of autocrats. [...] For Trump and Putin one amazing similarity is the way they lie. [...] Most politicians [...] who sometimes lie will want you to [...] believe something. These guys lie to assert power. The more absurd what they say is, the more power they have asserted.[3]

Accepting, embracing the lie or the triumphant bullshitting, regardless of whether one believes it, is a way of giving in to power. And this ability to assert power without the need to make others believe renders the supremacy even more attractive. This is neither a ploy of the classic charismatic leader nor mere populism, but rather a strategy that forges followers by making them believe in nothing but one's own supremacy.

Second, *the affectivity of truth*. Emotions have always been part of truth telling (e.g., in the sense of prophecy, believing, fearing a truth). Telling the truth and learning the truth may shake us, touch us. It may disconcert and confuse us, and it may cause relief, a feeling of recognition or even enlightenment. While these moments are rarely accepted as part of (modern) scientific truth claims, they are indeed ingredients of those forms of truth-telling that cannot be divorced from the particular truth-telling, such as in ethical practices, criminal law procedures or political disputes (Foucault 2000, 2001; Valverde, this volume). But in the emerging regime of truth, emotions occupy a different

[2] Interesting in that regard is Clara Casabó's (2018) observation that post-truth politics à la Trump, ironically, breaks with the regime of neoliberal evidence-based and expert-oriented government.

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_7dw8bXRpk&feature=youtu.be (05/11/2018).

space. Especially striking is how people's fear (Bröckling 2016; Bargetz 2017), their pain and sentimentality (Berlant 2000) and their rage[4] is treated as a matter of truth that cannot be topped by any rational reasoning, including that which concerns people's alleged self-interests (Hochschild 2016, 8ff.). Truth, in other words, is cast as the property of "true patriots" whose pain and sentimentality, whose fears of what is yet to come, and whose outrage are taken as a peculiar deep truth (of feeling, as it were) (Hentschel 2018). Emotions also matter as that which does not allow us to exit our respective bubbles, because we are trapped between what Arlie Hochschild (2016, 5f.) has famously called "empathy walls". Both modes of affective truth dwell in a state of intensity where they are easy to mobilize and to fuse with other emotions that allow for reclaiming their own truth.

Third, a *dark sense of finitude*. While Trump and others deny climate change and related man-made threats, this truth regime coincides with a new awareness of finitude and the human being's subject position in the world. The truth today, it seems, exposes its radically existential dimension. Realizing its own capacity to destroy the environment in an era of the Anthropocene, humankind finds itself in the situation not only of reorienting its relationship with the multiple fellow beings inhabiting earth (Mbembe 2015) but also of rethinking its position as a subject of cognition (Colebrook 2012): the earth could survive without human beings (Grove/Chandler 2017).

Fourth, *truth without meaning*. On a less existential level, this experience, interestingly, recurs with the rise of big data and algorithms. Algorithms exceed the human capacity of cognition not only in their ability to parse incomputable data and render them visible and comprehensible to human cognition and perception in the first place; they also deploy a different mode of cognition that challenges established human sense making (Hörl 2011). Algorithms do not think hermeneutically in terms of words and language (Rouvroy 2012), nor do they search for causalities and explanations. When bringing disparate parameters together on the basis of resemblance and analogy (Aradau 2015), they are able to systematically draw unforeseen connections and, given certain inputs and rules, generate novel sets of relationships (Clough et al. 2015, 153f.). As Patricia Clough et al. expound, in view of its "capacity to be adaptable and 'creative'", digital computing problematizes the relationship between observer and observing subject (154f.), and, perhaps once again, the sovereignty of the human gaze. At the same time, algorithms ignore the world outside of data, their world is flat: they can communicate, though without "understanding" (Esposito 2017, 257). They may figure out the patterns of our behavior and our decision making—in such a way that they sometimes seem to know us better than we do ourselves. But they do not have a sense for the truth of our "inner selves" (Foucault 1993), nor for the world of texts and interpretation where the truth can only be grasped through, and is produced by, language—that on its part will always fail to ultimately determining the truth (Derrida 2001).

Fifth, *a regime of the all-visible, without appearance*. As regards the formation of public opinion, big data and algorithms also contribute to a shift away from reliance on facts to settle arguments towards addressing "public sentiment" and impression. As William Davies (2016) observes, whereas

[4] From a right-wing side: see e.g. Marc Jongen (2017): *Migration und Thymostraining – Dr. Marc Jongen beim IfS*, Feb 24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cg_KuESI7rY (05/11/2018), who draws on Sloterdijk (2006).

classical statistics is usually deliberately produced by expert design, big data are constantly being collected by default. And instead of producing facts in terms of rising or decreasing crime rates, unemployment figures or numbers of economic growth, parsing social media typically is to measure how a given politician, political body or policy is being "perceived", with algorithms virtually delivering real time-updates. According to Jacques Rancière (1998, 103f.), the classical survey is already a consensus machine that erases a democratic sense. Producing "a regime of the all-visible" that presents the "public opinion" as the epiphenomenon "to the body of the people", it renders difference, and dissensus, impossible. If mere representation is what prevails, it leaves no place for appearance to occur. In today's world of social media, we might conclude, the regime of the all-visible is perhaps more prevalent than ever, while the idea of the people raising their voice in an unforeseeable manner is fading away. There is not even a body: the body of the people to be represented, let alone a sense of a people that would elude (re-)presentation. It is a truth regime that faces us with a new challenge of thinking and enacting the political.

To be sure, talking of "regimes" is not to say that we were captives of these worlds and that there were no ways of seeing and thinking things differently. Our point is a different one: the emerging regime of truth—its self-referentiality, its affectivity, its dark sense of finitude, its algorithmic meaninglessness and its all-visibility with no appearance of the political—points us to an understanding of truth as utterly relational, as communicative practice. Truth is not just lying there in its bare form, to be taken notice of or carried away. It must be recognized and it must be said, spoken out, and a public is needed to accept this truth. Truth always involves establishing a meaningful connection, between utterances, acts, people, environments, histories, ideas, and so on. And we only have our senses and our knowledge to experience and judge what is true. As Claire Colebrook holds, with reference to J. Hills Miller (2001, 71): if something were universally and unquestionably true there would be no need to say it. Or to put it another way: nobody is in the position to say that something is unquestionably true, as "universality can have no copyright". And "to say that something *is*" only makes sense "if it is articulated against what *is not*" (Colebrook 2004, 166; see also Vogelmann, this volume). Truth is contested, and it must be open to contestation, which is what constitutes its political character (Vogelmann 2014).

Political Satire and the Desire for Truth

The demise of the will to truth in the contemporary political field brings about the rise of a range of agencies, devices, and ethics that aim to restore the power of truth in different ways. This reaches from "devices for the production of a fragile reassurance", as Ben Anderson has termed the proliferation of fact checking (Anderson/Mühlhoff forthcoming), to calls to "believe in truth", as Timothy Snyder has famously argued,[5] and to not allow emotions to reign and come back instead to the grounds of rational reasoning. The demise of truth comes with the desire for it. Yet while fact checking and calls to reason are standards in political communication, they are only partially equipped

[5] Number 8 of Synder's *20 lessons from the 20th century on how to survive in Trump's America* (November 21, 2016) reads: "Believe in truth. To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights." http://inthesetimes.com/article/19658/20-lessons-from-the-20th-century-on-how-to-survive-in-trumps-america (05/11/2018).

to address the current political condition in which the amount of "noise" and "bullshitting" is overwhelming them. We want to take a closer look at a set of strategies that launch a different, perhaps more vivid approach to truth in times of its uncertainty. As we will try to show, expressions of the desire for truth that we find in Trevor Noah's daily satire of Trump may be symptomatic for the emerging regime of truth that we are trying to grasp in this special issue, while pointing to some of its most central mechanisms and fighting its most cynical effects.

Satire has been "accused of breeding cynicism" while also being "heralded as invaluable in speaking truth to power", Rebecca Higgie (2014, 183) writes. We are interested in what "speaking truth to power" can mean today and probe it as *making sense by evoking a range of imaginative and affective registers.* While scholars in the fields of comedy see the essence of satire in the power of carving out the absurdity in power arrangements and doing so by shocking its audience (Kaye/Johnson 2016, 132), it seems to us that, with the present's intrinsically uncertain relation between truth and democratic politics, satire's endeavor is more serious. The "constructive social criticism" (ibid.) that is at work here operates through a range of affective and imaginative registers that we want to explore. Rather than a cynicism about power, what comes to the fore is a desire for truth and a reopening of the political.

In The Daily Show, Noah addresses the breaking off of truth from the political through a range of acts of re-connecting—speech acts, persons, imaginaries—not only in such a way as to surprise us, and thus to make us laugh;**[6]** but also to make us see things differently, to move us, and, in Sara Ahmed's (2006) sense, to orient us. Emotions do not need to get out of the way for this endeavor, but are made to work hard. Noah engages in a mode of truth-telling—introducing new affective and imaginative registers to reach out to different relations of and concerns with truth.

By tracing four imaginary personifications of Trump that Trevor Noah evokes in different segments on the president, we want to carve out some of these registers that invite our, the audience's, affective thoughts and judgments to transgress common framings. These personifications are extracted from three shows covering the time when Trump was still a candidate in October 2015, to the week after his inauguration in 2017 up to the moment when an anonymous senior official in the White House published an opinion piece about the unrest in the White House in September 2018. The personifications reach beyond more conventional critical wisdoms about the president, according to which Trump is unfit for office, incoherent, unpresidential and much more. These personifications are at the same time perceptions about "us" in times of Trump. Together they invoke affective registers that, we argue, help us re/imagine truthful relations in uncertain political times.

We Hostages: Prelude to a Scary Reality

A first register that Trevor Noah employs consists of delineating an uncanny imagination of us as hostages in a new truth regime reigned by a man with a dark sense of the world. And so he begins his segment on January 21, 2017, a

[6] As Hedvig Ördén (2018, 24), drawing on Helmuth Plessner (1970), observes, it is the "unanswerableness" that provokes our laughter: in situations where things make a surprising appearance or take "an unforeseen turn", provided, of course, they lack of an existential threat.

week after Trump began his presidency, with a sentence full of fervor:[7] "It's been almost a week, a whole week since Donald Trump became president! But it *feels* like a lot longer *[intense booing in the audience]*." Noah hit it. So much has happened in that first week. He shares his grim vision on the matter of reality in times of Trump: not only that Trump, "from the get-go, is determined to creating his own reality", but "one week into Trump's Presidency […] the realization is beginning to dawn: The difference between *candidate* Trump and *president* Trump is that now we have to live in his crazy reality". Zooming into a one-on-one conversation with a CNN reporter in the White House we see Trump, in a serious manner, leaning forward to his interviewer, as if passing on an important wisdom: "David", he says to the CNN reporter, "I know you are a sophisticated guy. The world is a mess. The world is as angry as it gets. Well, you think this is gonna cause a little more anger? The world is an angry place!"

Zooming out we see Noah again, befuddled, confused almost: "Jesus, Dude", he says "if he's gonna talk like that, I feel like he needs a different style of make-up." And suddenly a make up mask is hanging over Trump's face making him look like the joker in *The dark knight (Batman)* (see image 1). Then, the sequence is played again, with Trump speaking the same words, but this time with the joker make-up, his skin whitened, his lips red. It is scary. The audience explodes clapping. For the final sequence, Noah is pointing to Trump with his new joker make-up: "We are all his hostage. He's taken over *our* world."

The Daily Show - Welcome to President Trump's Reality

It is an uncanny moment: the make-up estranges Trump, while letting something extraneous, the face of the joker, reveal an element of familiarity and make us imagine a scary co-presence. Trump becomes the figure with a cynical view of the world for whom any action based on a sophisticated assessment is not worth the effort, or simply naïve.[8] The joker in batman is cryptic and obscure; his world one of deep darkness. "Some men just want to watch the world burn" is an iconic quote created in the movie. What Trump's "taking over our world" and making us his "hostage" means, remains open. But Noah has offered the imagery of a scary figure that we will not forget.

[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2YLS8oNmls (05/11/2018).

[8] For a beautiful framing of the uncanny in this sense, see https://uncanny.ici-berlin.org: "The 'uncanny' delineates a strange proximity between the known and the unknown, either as something familiar presenting itself under an extraneous shape, or as something extraneous revealing an element of familiarity in its features."

Message from Africa: Familiarizing

A second remarkable register that Trevor Noah operates with is that of familiarizing us, the audience, with something we may otherwise perceive as having nothing to do "with us". Trump, we learn, is like an African president, an African dictator even. Noah, the young colored man from South Africa, recognize the striking parallels: "For me as an African, there is just something familiar to Trump, that makes me feel at home", Noah says in October 2015,[9] playing a clip of then South African president Jacob Zuma's xenophobic remarks in combination with Trump's infamous statements on alleged Mexican rapists. And, after a segment on Trump talking about autism and vaccines, Noah takes on a teacher's pose and asks: "Now: Was that factual? No! But was it presidential? Depends where you come from." The segment continues with a report on then Gambia's president Jammeh talking about curing AIDS with bananas and comes back to Trevor Noah bursting with laughter while himself taking a bite of a banana murmuring: "better safe than sorry". Then, he states with seriousness: "What I am trying to say is: Donald Trump is presidential, he just happens to be running on the wrong continent. In fact, once you realize that Trump is basically the perfect African President you start to notice the similarities everywhere" —while showing clips of Trump bragging with his richness, his intellect and his confidence of victory, and matching those statements with words by Uganda's Idi Amin, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.

Donald Trump - America's African President: The Daily Show

After years of openly questioning Obama's legitimacy to be in office over his "being from Africa", now Trump himself is put into the costume of a stereotypical African autocrat (see image 2). Trevor Noah has reflected in many interviews on his ability to see things from an outsider's perspective, making American politics strange, and unsettling a certain taken-for-grantedness. Commentators have given him this credit for that, for example Keishin Amstrong from the BBC asserts that "Noah's outsider view allows the US to better see itself, and his comedy is so funny because it's that much more true".[10] It is a change of perspective that the anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FPrJxTvgdQ (05/11/2018).

(2006, 6) have articulated over a decade ago. Might it be, they asked, that "the world at large is looking ever more 'postcolonial'"? Long before autocrats emerging so prominently in the political leadership of Western democracies, the Comaroffs' speculation went that "Africa in particular, and the South in general, come, in significant respects, to anticipate the unfolding history of Euro-America", and that looking at and from the "'Global South' [...] affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large" (Comaroff/Comaroff 2012, 114). It is a way of narrating modernity from its undersides, "like those maps that, as a cosmic joke, invert planet earth to place the south on top, the north below" (117). In Noah's cosmic joke, then, the perspective is downside up; and the argument is not so much a historical one, as many critics of Trump are trying to make when asking how much of a fascist he is, but it is an argument involving an elsewhere that he can give testimony of. He acts as the "messenger" from Africa at the risk of brushing aside any sophistication in narrating African realities. And he catches us on our own stereotypes, which are instantly turned around once we see the traces of this far-away reality in "our own" world: we begin to realize that Trump came to be the dictator of our reality.

We Passengers in the Hands of the Killer Pilot: On (Not) Showing Your Face

The third register is about the forms of becoming visible in this troubled political moment. Noah introduces the breaking news about an anonymous senior White House official's opinion piece in the New York Times of September 5, 2018, on the resistance against Trump inside the White House.[11] "There is a secret group of people", he comments *[raising the voice]*,

> within the White House, actively working to curb president Trump. Which is wild because this means this whole time we've been dealing with the watered down version of Trump? You telling me that this *[a public image of Trump making a speech appears]* is the better version? [...] This is diet Trump? That's what you're saying?

Instead of limiting himself to the criticism that the anonymous voice didn't even dare to show her face, as was the instant reaction of many commentators to this op-ed, Noah reverses the logic of its secretive gesture: conditions must be more desperate than we imagined if people in the White House are covertly working hard to avert the worst. But why, Noah echoes the public irritation, this revelation now at all? We hear a female voice reading a quote from the article: "It may be cold comfort in this chaotic era, but Americans should know that there are adults in the room. We fully recognize what is happening. And we are trying to do what's right even when Donald Trump won't." Noah *[staring, as if trying to understand what this means]:*

> Ok, that doesn't make me feel any better. Because before this, I knew there was turbulence. But now, someone just came on the P.A. system and is like *[in the manner of a flight attendant who makes her announcement in the best*

[10] http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170918-how-trevor-noah-conquered-us-comedy (05/11/2018).

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whQE6JnNoqM&t=320s&frags=pl%2Cwn (05/11/2018).

mood ever]. 'Uh, ladies and gentlemen, the pilot is actively trying to crash the plane, but don't be alarmed. We're doing everything we can to stop him. Mikey got a pretty good choke hold and I said some pretty harsh words. So please keep your seat belts fastened and enjoy your peanuts and tax cuts.

After a pause staring into the camera he shouts into a cheering crowd: "This is wild!" What is being conveyed here is not only an imagery of Trump the killer pilot. What is also called out are the professionals working with him who try to calm people down by mobilizing parts of their power that appear to be ridiculously useless in the face of the actual threat at hand. We are all in this plane. And no, neither peanuts nor tax cuts—the opium of the people—will get us out of this situation, we might continue to imagine.

Message from the Future: Imagining Change

The fourth register takes us to an imagery of Trump stripped of his power. Trump's legal team, as described in a new book, prepares Trump to be interviewed by FBI investigator Robert Mueller. A media report is now read out according to which, after an interview rehearsal that went really bad, one of Trump's lawyers advised him: "Don't testify, it's either that or an orange jumpsuit." Noah repeats the statement in his words, slowly: "Don't testify or you end up in an orange jumpsuit. How badly did Trump have to lie in a 'fake interview' for his lawyer to tell him that? […] And, by the way, 'orange jumpsuit' is also what Melania calls Trump's naked body. Yeah." *[audience cheering, wooing]*

We do not see a picture of this, but we can still imagine what this means. The orange jumpsuit is what prisoners get to wear, and what Melania Trump allegedly calls his body, which, we may assume, is very much untrue. The double interpretation of the jumpsuit metaphor as Trump being stripped off his lies, his power, his entourage, and his clothes. Trump, naked: the king without clothes. But this is no consolation, it is only to make us imagine that the bullshitting and the constant back and forth between telling the truth (maybe) and openly lying is not the end of the story and of Trump's power to literally misguide us ("How badly did Trump have to lie in a 'fake interview' for his lawyer to tell him that?").

So, what do we learn from these four imaginaries on the desire for truth in this current condition? Trump, *the joker* (the uncanny, who loves evil and thinks that any civilized act is naïve); Trump, *the African dictator* (with all the associations from narcissism, "tribalism", to not caring about the rule of law and the addiction to power); Trump, *the killer pilot* (willingly crashing the plain and exposing his own people to death), and even Trump *in the orange jumpsuit* (potentially stripped of his power, and his clothes) are scary imageries and confront us with the severity of the situation.

True Entanglements

"Satires moralise and they also simplify", writes literary scholar Robert Phiddian (2013, 52), but the work that the Trump segments in The Daily Show are different. Rather than moralizing, we see Trevor Noah assessing the intensity of the current political turbulence. By addressing matters of truth and lie as "matters of the risible" (Berlant/Ngai 2017, 235), Noah is far from ridiculing or trivializing what is going on. More than mocking political realities and their protagonists, he unpacks the damaged truth-democracy-arrangement in its funniest, most outrageous, and serious core. Noah himself appears to be enervated, angry, passionate, puzzled; he is laughing about how ridiculous things are, while not accepting, not giving in. This mode of involving oneself emotionally and speaking in a first-person voice (e.g., "what hit me most", "what strikes me", "what I don't understand") is a form of truth-telling, but it is not moralizing in the sense of judging, preaching or making one feel bad.

And, rather than simplifying, we see this kind of satire engaged in drawing a range of lighthearted connections, while bringing in new elements to complicate the matter. All of the Trump segments discussed above master a double de/familiarizing technique. When Trump is painted in joker make-up or is likened to an African dictator, when he is the protagonist in an imaginary killer plane scene or a naked president we may call this defamiliarizing (Palmer 1987; Druick 2009). He is made strange, while an outrageous costume, a ridiculous make-up, or a killer movie setting don't feel implausible anymore; instead, they make sense and are familiarized. It is in this cheerful, sometimes uneasy, strange yet familiar sense-making that we see political satire reinventing "venues of critical thinking" (Kaye/Johnson 2016, 131).

In these venues, truth must not get stripped of affective matter. On the contrary, Noah seems to do affective work for us, the audience, sometimes even on our behalf, to help us see the way through the current condition. While wanting our laughter, he is not cynical, but calls out the darkest cynicism that the Trump regime embodies. He thus not only offers variations to imagine Trump, but also points to a politically engaged subjectivity in post-truth times, transported by his own mode of truth-telling, as the one who masters the double technique of de/familiarizing. It is this mindset of orienting us, even if through absurd and exaggerated elements of style, that Noah's satire counteracts Trump's triumphant bullshitting and reopens the political in a refreshing way. It is a gesture of entangling the objects of his joke (and us), while not letting Trump off the hook, not allowing him to dwell in a space of un-boundedness with regard to truth. The questions Noah raises again and again "who is this?" (pointing to Trump) or "what does this even mean?" (reacting to a Trump statement) expose the indifference to truth in the name of supremacy as part of what holds us in the "grip of dread". Dread, David Theo Goldberg (2018) maintains,

> is the sense that there is no truth in the matter, nothing to
> know or grasp. Dread trades on the reduction to absolute
> absence: no-knowledge, no-truth, non-relation, nothing left

> to lose. Dread, in short, is unspeakable. Or more precise-
> ly, the urgent reach for a truth incessantly evaporating. [...]
> Where dread privatizes the affective, isolates it as discrete
> individualized feeling, all that is left to this communality of
> feeling is pure futility.

The desire for truth in these troubling times, then, has to do with calling out the grip of the cynicism of no-knowledge and no-truth, with re-publicizing emotions and drawing lines of anger and laughter, and with declaring what is to lose. The "uncanny" evoked in some of the segments on Trump lures us right into the grip of the dread.

"Humor", Colebrook argues, "is not the reversal of cause and effect but the abandonment of the 'before and after' relations—the very line of time—that allow us to think in terms of causes and intentions, of grounds and consequents" (2004, 136). Trevor Noah's satire takes our mind back and forth, it is by immersing our imagination, just for a moment, into the grim reality of dictatorships, clientelism and corruption on the African continent, that we comprehend that this chilling world is not so far away as we thought, and nonetheless that it is different. Unlike irony, satire—and Noah in his show—does not aspire to a superior position, one that presumes to know better. Rather, it "examines life and its inherent propensities" (145). The absurd and the realistic situation intermingle and merge: we are hostages in the plane as it is about to crash, as we are of a government that is about to destroy everything that we might call progressive achievements or foundations of democratic thinking. Or we witness Trump, the unscrupulous potentate insistently speaking to the CNN reporter, entangling—and thus taking—him, and us, into the world that is "a mess" and that does not deserve any naïve humanism. We are being involved and see ourselves being involved in a reality we wish wasn't real.

In *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek (2010, 328) describes a gap between knowledge and belief in our socio-psychological perception of the impossible, the possible, and the real. "We know the (ecological) catastrophe is possible, probably even, yet we do not believe it will really happen." But once the catastrophe appears, it is "'renormalized', perceived as part of the normal run of things, as always already having been possible". This, Žižek explains, also happened with the victory of Trump in the US: first it was "unimaginable" for liberals, "a bad joke" that Trump was going to be elected. But then, "once it happened, it was instantly renormalized". Noah's political satire operates at the verge of such a renormalization of Trump and the disorienting relation to truth that surrounds his reign. Far from simply enacting the new reality as a "bad joke" and far from merely supplying relief, he puts his joking skills to work against this renormalization, i.e., to not let the lies to be passed over, to call out the cynicism, to expose some of the most dramatic features of this reign, and to revive our senses—of laughter, but also of anger and outrage, as we realize that this possibility indeed has come true. It is the recognition of this capture, and the inventive description of it, that may be at the beginning of thinking truth's relation to the political anew. We may laugh, and yet it does not produce relief. Rather, Noah's joke is more like a "lifeline" (Ahmed 2006,

17f.), i.e., an investment, a promise, and something that may be thrown to us to help us "get out of an impossible world" —a lifeline of laughter in a political realm where perhaps nothing less than the survival of democracy is at stake.

Introducing the Issue

To find truth in the funny—all while contemplating its darkest entanglements—is but one way of addressing matters of truth in our current conditions. The special issue sets out to cast a range of perspectives on the entanglements between truth, the political, affective publics and their subjectivities; in short, it looks for reorienting matters of truth in uncertain political times. In the remainder of this introduction we would like to come back to some of the features with which we began to delineate the current regime of truth (its self-referentiality and affectivity, its meaninglessness, and the all-visibility without appearance) and interweave them with the contributions in this special issue.

As Rainer *Mühlhoff* shows, a contemporary style of authoritarian politics operates on a highly affective register—and it is self-referential: the cynical will to disturb and destroy the established political apparatus receives the more attention and approval the more it deviates from the common matter-of-fact style of politics. The notion of affective susceptibility ("Angänglichkeit"), Mühlhoff elaborates, allows us to capture the gist of this populism under current media-technological conditions. In a similar vein, Mariana *Valverde* rediscovers Adorno's notion of a "jargon of authenticity" for making sense of current populist styles. As she demonstrates for the context of Toronto, a "combination of almost contentless platitudes and claims about unique individuality" constitutes a belief in the truth of power today. Avowal, in this populist attitude, not only becomes self-referential but, in a way, also meaningless. If subjectivity in the computer age is characterized by the informed subject type, Janosik *Herder* shows that this subject constitution is a process of affective in-formation, using the example of the practice of self-tracking. The relation we establish to our "true self" is governed by feedback-loops of information that are joyously being perceived and integrated into our own cosmos. Truth, here, means the mere perfection of information. Far beyond such a perfection, Norbert *Paulo* addresses the environment of social media where the epistemic rules of establishing truth to date are deeply uncertain. Post-truth thinking that emerges in this environment, the author argues, may nonetheless be considered "rational". People who navigate through such epistemic uncertainty rely on their own deliberation—and on trusting those whose opinions they share anyway. Interestingly, this is not only true with regard to the stereotypical filter bubble: to the extent that we all tend to overvalue our own judgements and trust the opinions of those "like us", while underestimating the value of expert reasoning—we all think in a post-truth way. Academia is claiming a last stronghold against this arbitrariness. Today's prevalent peer review procedures in academia have been widely criticized as fostering a mainstreaming process where scientists are subjected to a regime of all-visibility that minimizes the space of dissensus and non-conformist

creativity: there is, in Rancière's words, no space for appearance. As Peter *Niesen* elucidates in a plea for *The Cautionary Use of Fakes*, the scientific hoax is not simply exposing this regime. Instead, "falling for fakes" may be worth the risk and even help us thinkers to stay more honest. Truth, the author reminds us, is not "lurking" in an autonomous sphere, "beyond all possible justifications", but must be approached in contestation, which is the only way of re-appearance. Similarly, Frieder *Vogelmann* argues that there is no "epistemic sovereign" to defend truth. Drawing on Arendt's and Rawls' work, the author goes beyond post-truth diagnostics as well as relativist stances in order to develop a procedural conception of truth. This leads us to a productive reversion of the supposed tension between truth and politics and between the idea of a truth that is always contested, and therefore too weak, and at the same time despotic, and therefore too strong, to meet the political aspiration of consensus. If there is a sense of finitude today, there is also the force of truth waiting to be enacted, re-oriented and set on new paths.**[12]**

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