

## ***Alt-Truths and Insta-Realities: The Psychopolitics of Contemporary Right***

Our slow and infrequent publishing platform of Red Thread journal presents its new issue, investigating the new-old topic of the contemporary right-wing use of media. Nowadays re-amplified and brought to the fore by the Covid-19 global emergency, the totalizing narrative of the crisis have strengthened and reaffirmed further the old problems of the lack of universality and the narrative of truth.

The autocratic states in the region of South-East Europe and Middle East – the geopolitical space where our journal arises from – have tightened their belt on freedom even more and introduced various different states of emergency. Now confined to their homes almost permanently in front of the Big Brother screens, the citizens are exposed to the high radiation of propaganda and terrorized by power games and paranoid kitsch, 24/7.

It took a global crisis to show us how little of the social state is left – how, alongside science and education, the former public health systems are systematically destroyed. Witnessing all the privatizations and cutoffs for decades we already knew that from before, but the extent of annihilation of the social services becomes brutally visible and unforgivably telling about where we stand now.

There is so much to say about how we got to where we are at this point. So many trajectories to explore and inspect, so many turns, events, updates, historical breaks to take into the account, so much of the latest development to consider. When we started to explore the collapse of (especially media) culture of the previous decade, the thread was unwoven that has led through the labyrinth of *everywhere*; we could follow it back to economy, technology, politics, art, education... There is not a social institution or a form of culture to remain unaffected by the seemingly unstoppable regression of everything.

By boosting the narrative about the “invisible enemy” the regimes in the region also made sure to make their “real” enemies quite visible, misusing the health crisis as a cover to launch the attack on all the activists and journalists, all the opposition, all the minorities and migrants and foreigners, on everybody not cheerleading for their permanent stay on power. The right-wing governments are especially keen to rule by decrees and attack artists and intellectuals, often identified as “elites” or “cultural Marxist”, or in the propagandistic populist rhetoric as “betrayers of the people”. Behind the scenes happens perhaps the biggest looting ever; the companies by loyal tycoons will be supported by the millions and billions of tax payer’s money, while the cuts in funds for culture qualify for the title of “genocide”.

This development is pushed aside from being discussed in the public discourse by the bizarre and never-ending media spectacle. The conspiracy theories made few more

predictable turns to confirm the old checklist of enemies: surely the migrants are guilty for this disease, alongside the guest-workers who came back home from the wealthy EU countries (instead of just sending in their money and dying peacefully abroad); in the West there are claims that this virus is produced in Chinese labs to finally destroy the global supremacy of Europe and America, while in China there are theories that the virus is a biological weapon implanted by the USA military to stop the growth of China; obviously this must be the punishment from God for all these migrations and unholy mixing of people and nations. And why not add something from the standard palette of alt-right alt-truths: what is to blame are 5G networks, HAARP systems and of course the good old New Global Order.

Finally, we also expected this one, being the old foundational trope of what is called alt-right media: all what is happening now is just a media conspiracy. There is no virus, no pandemic, and nobody is dying from the thing; this is obviously the attempt by the left-wing billionaires (who often happen to be the reptilian humanoids from outer space, or Jews) to introduce the new global regime under the auspice of a fake crisis. However obviously fantastic, such stories can produce some collective damage, but there is the sibling of this narrative which is much more dangerous: there is no crisis and everything is “as it always was”, some flu is harder than other, and sometimes the nature needs to purge a species by killing a bit more of the weak. The nations will only emerge stronger (and younger) after this. All is natural and normal.

The conspiracies are paired with selling anything possible to be sold in such a situation, and it’s a lot. Capitalism tries to use every situation for its expansion and accumulation, so you can try your luck with drinking bleach, or cow and camel urine, or a barrel of vodka, or eating cow dung or inordinate amount of expensive garlic-based products as remedy; or you could order \$400 virus-protecting blessings instead, accompanied by the televangelist’s call to touch the TV screen as a means of “spiritual vaccination” by proxy (Happy Science, USA). You can also try applying cotton ball soaked in violet oil to the anus (Prophetic Medicine, Iran), or breathing the hot air from hair dryer each 15 minutes (Facebook); the Miracle Mineral Solution (MMS), a mix containing amphetamines, cocaine and nicotine, is on sale on the Dark Web for just \$300. If any of this doesn't work you could try with some panic buying of chloroquine until people who regularly need it to treat malaria stay without it, and until you obtain arrhythmia and perhaps die from it.

The totalizing reality of consumption never sleeps, so the offer is much larger for those still feeling healthy: pay attention to all the boost-your-productivity advices to maximally exploit the potential of the available time-at-home. As no one is sure to keep their job, you should manically devote yourself to developing new skills for the ever-changing labour market seeking multi-skilled personnel: enroll in all the online courses on offer. Consume content - and more content - on the significantly reduced

price or for free, being only slightly interrupted by the ads for the even more attractive content on even greater discounts. Whatever you do, stay glued to your screen, and don't worry; even your cultural needs are taken care of by all the virtual exhibitions and concerts, and more virtual programs are underway. It will be easy and effortless: #stayathome, #staysafe, #stayafrail, #stayconfused, #keeponpanicking & #keeponconsuming.

[But not everybody could afford to stay safe at home; some were forced to work while the others were forced to consume.]

Almost any text from this issue could, if read properly, be the announcement of such development and of the present state of affairs. Steve Bannon, one of the architects of this alt-reality, would almost surely be predicted to say on the infamous FOX TV News precisely what he just did: that "COVID-19 is a Communist Party virus".

In a world where populist dictatorships came to power through electoral politics, the feeling of uneasiness and anxiety turns into a sense that the world is dislocated, that things no longer mean what they used to mean, that any concepts can now be used to refer to anything and everything. It creates the shared sense that today, to quote from one of the texts from the issue, "you can just say anything, create realities".

Many authors who joined this Red Thread edition were exploring the general principles of contemporary right-wing propaganda for quite some time. "Propaganda demands infrastructure and narrative ... [It] aims to construct reality itself", writes **Jonas Staal** in his analysis of the propagandistic-artistic role of Bannon that we present in this issue. Staal reminds of the old but often forgotten fact: "In order to construct reality a particular narrative, a set of values and ideas, has to be repeated via as many channels as possible so as to generate its acceptance as the 'new normal'. Propaganda works best when we no longer consider it propaganda, but rather the fact of life."

A contribution by **Hazal Özvarış** presents an anthology of the rapid media transformation in Turkey over the previous two decades, but which, if abstracted from the particular examples, may also serve as the accurate description of what exactly happened with media systems, big and small, traditional or digital, all over the region and beyond. The changes in ownership, financing and editorial processes are mirrored in the changes of methods, technologies and content. The global decline of liberal values and democracy and the rising wave of anti-elitism matches the dwindling number of women journalists; it witnesses about the multiple instances of harassing journalists, including unemployment, social lynching and arrests, and eventually physical violence. But it also sheds light on the voice of the grassroots in the times of Gezi park resistance, revealing "another kind of journalism to counter for-profit journalism".

About the arrests and imprisonments, we know from personal experience: our publisher and our friend Osman Kavala is in prison for more than 900 days now. We hope – we know! – that for the publishing of our next issue he will be free. This only makes our work, and everybody's, more urgent.

Examining the contemporary propagandistic activity of the far-right, **Jelena Vesić** discusses the concepts of *appropriation* and *reactionary détournement* that are able to turn the original 'claims of truth' into their opposite. Taking as her case study the travelling exhibition of *Uncensored Lies*, organised in Serbia in 2016 by the now presidential press service of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the author analyses the mechanism of passive-aggressive propaganda of *pathetic dictatorship*.

Through the mimicry of the language of contemporary culture of samples, remixes, copy-pastes, drags and drops and mash-ups, the exhibition claimed that the media space in Serbia is not only free and democratic, but even saturated with unjust criticism towards its well-intended government. In reality, Serbia fell further to the position 93 on the World Press Freedom Index. Constructed from the "annexed" journalistic material and the personal posts from social media taken out of context and blown out of all proportions, this bizarre display managed to flatten and negate the entire complexity of exhibition-making as a form of public address.

In their analysis of TV serials and especially Turkish telenovelas, **Feyza Akinerdem & Nükhet Sirman** examine how the watching subjects and their autonomous position is controlled by the televised political narratives, how the sense of atmosphere and affects reframes the viewers as voters and consumers.

The authors emphasize the term *atmosphere* as "a sense of the present that has not yet crystallized into a 'structure' or a 'history'". The rules here seem to be deceptively simple: "the value of a story is the number of people who are watching it". The structure of TV serials is not any longer one of melodrama, but of a *game*; it is not anymore about the struggle between good and evil, but about the neverending contest for power. "A demand for justice is abandoned for the sake of a bigger truth that assimilates the plots of injustice into a larger story of national pride that allows the mastery of power." (We are sorry for not being able to publish the English version of the article; read more about it on the article page.)

**Ana Teixeira Pinto** discusses things like *meme magic* and *shitposting* as ways of turning fiction into fact: "Speculative folly is a form of currency – trust no one, nothing is what it seems, the unbelievable alone can be believed". She finds that "the paranoid ideation suffers not from the lack of logic but from unreality", and occurs as a "mix of fantasies of omnipotence and perceived vulnerability" that blends into conspiratory thinking: "Conspiracy theory is poor man's institutional critique".

Pinto understands it as not merely a sign of mental delusion, but rather a cynical

stance towards the knowledge and the very possibility of truth.

The ambivalence once again proves to be the core of this transformation: irony, or perhaps more precise sarcasm, is the emotional weapon fueling the rapid rise of far right, while on a different grounds of the previous world it served as *a questioning attitude* and stood for a *critical stance*. Pinto refers to Angela Nagel, who extensively wrote on the topic in her 2017 title *Kill all Normies*. The book underlines the capacity of irony to maintain political and moral ambivalence, what enables the simultaneous flirting with fascist and racist idioms and dodging any responsibility for the choices made through such actions.

**Ahmet Ersoy** writes about the complex machinery of capitalism that generates constant serialized stimuli and various versions of instant reality, able to penetrate deep into our psyche and to subjugate us as subjects. Using the popular example of the musical app he demonstrates “how industrialized electronic media can overwhelm independent will, regulating and homogenizing our sensory engagement with the world”. The perceptual field is transformed by the consumption-oriented machinery, while the shallow feelings of induced psychological conformism are used as the tools for mesmerizing and stimulating the masses and producing collective stupor. Such apparatus leaves no room for personal contemplation, and produces a narcotic effect, the spaceless and atemporal reality of collective hallucination instead. For Ersoy, our current situation invites for rethinking the Benjamin’s critique of the hegemonic visuality of the historical Nazi regime and its absolute aesthetization of the field of politics.

Starting this issue, we introduce the new “From the Archives” slot with the interview with **Vilém Flusser** that is able to resonate and open new questions today, probably even more so than when it was conducted 30 years ago. To a careful observer, even in 1988 it was clear that the then upcoming mix of technology and media will produce historical consequences, and, first of all, new subjectivities. We should have to think harder, and more, about developing the own tools to handle the current situation and produce the own future. In the words of Flusser: “Every revolution, be it political, economic, social, or aesthetic, is in the last analysis a technical revolution.” (We express our gratitude to **Miklós Peternák** for helping us with this historical material.)

The history lessons do not stop here. That the form of “proto-alt-right” thinking, as is the most recognizable name for the phenomena we focused the most observing media, could also be a legal approach in the settler-colonial conflict about the right to even walk the land we learn in the interview with **Raja Shehadeh** (thanks to **Meltem Ahiska & Saygun Gökarıksel**). We also learn about the concept of 'sumud' as a form of peaceful resistance. A method that is not without its controversies - in the words of Shehadeh, sumud “is very complicated” – it invites for endurance, for perseverance,

for holding on in the situations where life itself is made difficult and almost impossible. It repeats: “I’m not going to give up. I’m going to stay put and I’m going to endure”.

**Geert Lovink** presents the readers with the powerful journey through the effects and affects of the particular design, the aesthetics and functionality of digital social networks of today. Some three decades after Flusser recognized the beginning of “spiritual revolution”, Lovink writes on its present character: “Social media and the psyche have fused ... Social reality is a corporate hybrid between handheld media and the psychic structure of the user .” Here, the sadness is a product of specific technological induction; it is about the structure, the algorithms, the very design of the visible (the applications) and the invisible (the servers and data flow) that act like the ultimate subjectivity, hence taking any other autonomy out from/of? the equation. This merging of social media and self is so totalizing that – as Lovink argues – “there is no single way to make everyone unhappy. Sadness will be tailored to you”. “Sad by Design” is the title chapter from Lovink’s same-titled book. If the chapter itself presents more of a diagnosis than a recipe for treatment, we encourage you to read the book. There is a way out from this, and it is (still) up to us to decide.

As any proper editorial is perhaps supposed to, we would like to end this introduction to Issue No 5 with the words coming from the texts themselves. So we leave you with this passage from “Sad by Design”:

“You may not understand a thing about the technicalities of wi-fi or algorithms, but it’s damn easy to grasp the relational stakes of the double check syndrome. ‘You obviously read it, so why didn’t you respond?’”

For Red Thread Issue 5:

**Jelena Vesić and Vladimir Jerić Vlidi**

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