

Storytelling and Authoritarianism in a Brave New World

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"Is it just me or is it getting crazier out there?", asks Arthur Fleck his audience before he becomes the Joker. It's a good question considering the perceived decline of the West.¹ Indeed, we may be quick to agree that it's getting crazier out there. But where exactly? In the Joker's fictional world, in ours or in both? Certain is only that COVID-19, climate change, social inequality, man-made disasters, the rise of extremism and scandals of all sorts is keeping us busy once we have entered the world of social media. There is no salvation from this fact.

However, it's important to differentiate between cause and effect. In doing so, we far too often succumb to our own confirmation bias and identify the menace depending on our own position in society: It's the elite vs masses, the poor vs the rich, the insiders vs the outsiders, men vs women, the vegans vs the meat-eaters, the old vs the young. The list is endless. But it's not that simple at all. In reality, the menace is to be found with us, ourselves, the Arthur Flecks of the real world and the personal grievances we hold against the "rigged system".

The "rigged system" describes a world that has become too complex for easy solutions

¹ See, the 2020 Munich Security Conference report: available https://securityconference.org/assets/user_upload/MunichSecurityReport2020.pdf.

and too transparent for difficult compromises and instead increasingly ruptures around questions of identity. In such a world the art of story-telling become ever more important as the "global battle of narratives" of China and Russia vs the West in face of the current pandemic, COVID- 19, vividly brings into the forefront of the global audience.² And indeed without the audience, the power of these narratives would as quickly vanish with the daily tides of information as they have arrived.

Already William Shakespeare knew that "the world is a stage and all the men and women are merely players", but it was the renowned Canadian-born sociologist Erving Goffman who explored the intricate and ambivalent relationship between the storyteller and her audience in his seminal work *The Presentation of the Self*. According to Goffman, we play a range of different roles determined by the situations we take ourselves to be in. In his view, there is no true self and we are damned to juggle with a variety of "masks" (quite literally in times of COVID-19) depending on the social performance unfolding before our eyes.

Although Goffman later modified his line of argument insofar, as he believed that our private lives offer a reclusive backstage, the granular measuring of the individual and her habitat in the digital panopticon begs the serious question of whether he was not right in the first place. To paraphrase Shakespeare, if we have our entrances to the digital theaters of everyday life, social media, but not our exits, the backstage quickly becomes centerstage and the other way around. As a result, our self, our identity, is solely bound to our own stage performance in the quest to be the drama queen or king of the day.

While to be or not to be is the question that unites us all on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, the existential dispute over its final plot is fought out to the bitter end by the Jokers and their rehearsed scripts: For some, it's the US Intelligence Agency that planted COVID-19 in the heart of the Chinese mainland or a deliberate plot of China's leadership to cripple the Western economy. And we shouldn't forget about those who believe it's neither, but aliens from outer space that seek the destruction of humankind (don't panic because garlic or a warm shower apparently work wonders). Clearly, there is a grain of truth in the Joker's observation that it *only takes one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy*.

But jokes aside, COVID-19 should not only teach us a lesson on how to enhance the resiliency of our national health infrastructures, but also how modern authoritarianism finds fertile ground amidst societies that do not offer any effective retreat or protection from the public gaze and hereby induce us to participate in the constant spectacle of real or manufactured crisis to reaffirm our position and identity in society. It is in this regard, that the increasing breadth and extent of social surveillance creates the perfect conditions for a cultural contestation of the demos on an existential level. Of course, this contestation can never be settled finitely and responsibly as long as we want to be part of the show. Till then, the Joker readily gives us advice: *Introduce a little bit of anarchy, upset the established order and everything becomes chaos. I'm an agent of chaos! Oh, and*

² Geopolitical symptoms of COVID-19: Narrative battles within the Eastern Partnership, Policy Brief (08.04.2020) available https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/EZ_Flashlight_04_2020_ENG_MK.pdf.

you know the thing about chaos? It's fair!