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Conversation between Ana Teixeira Pinto and Maxwell Stephens published in *Thievery and Songs* in 2021.

Maxwell

There is a strong desire in Gernot's work to delve into the dark underbelly of secular society; the narrator of his films continually engages with the problematic nature of the exceptions and norms that effectively maintain bourgeois hegemony. In the context of so-called "fake news" in our "post-truth" era, my sense is that the works struggle with notions of what counts as an authentic experience amidst the daily struggle to resist a deep and growing cynicism in the media in general, and perhaps in artistic discourse in particular.

Ana

Yes, I see what you mean. When I look at Gernot's work, the term "cruel optimism" comes to mind. Cruel optimism, according to cultural studies theorist Lauren Berlant, is a relationship in which the object of desire becomes an obstacle, an impediment to well-being. One might have a cruel attachment to food, to a certain body image, or to a vision of the good life. Most often, cruel attachment involves a mediated relationship with a political project – typically capitalism – as a means to organize daily life via the narrativisation of collective investment. In Gernot's work there is cruel attachment to the notion of the self and subjectivity – and also, by extension, to art and culture in general – as being able to provide spiritual sustenance or what you could call an identity . . .

Maxwell

I like the suggestion that attachment to the self and subjectivity is an impediment in Gernot's particular case; I wonder if this is an overall trend in social media as a whole. Reading about the upcoming (disinformation) digital campaign by the Trump administration, one might consider that perhaps truth has become an obstacle to well-being, but the right-wing media's target is far more clever: it's the process of authorship itself that is under attack. What was a crisis of authentication, of the authenticity that responsible journalism represents, has now become a complete and total culture war in which emotions run the day, opinions are replaced by conspiracy theories, and the relation of the general and the particular is being swapped – not by an ongoing chain of comparisons from particular case to particular case, but by a general flooding of fabricated particularities with the aim only to dissimulate lived realities from representability. The new monster of capitalism is a collective investment in dissimulation: a dissimulacra. (This is a wild claim, for sure!)

In all of this, it strikes me that Gernot's cruel optimism isn't about dissimulation (I'm not at all implying that you are saying this, I am), but rather about an unrepresentable excess that I associate with the (modern) labour of the negative; the resistance is in a much more vulnerable realm than reason – it lies in the psychological. In *Thievery and Songs*, for example, Gernot describes a state in which he no longer sleeps but vividly and continuously dreams. There is no possibility of waking up – he describes instead entering a somnambulistic space from his childhood in which religious indoctrination through the Christian sacrament and enculturation through performance art (à la Herman Nitsch – which brings to mind the current tendency in contemporary art to continually invoke "performative" acts) become indissociable from one another. Against this, the young Gernot gags on the host that is stuck to the roof of his mouth and recoils in horror at the realization that the performers of the artwork are spreading about not red paint, but animal blood. In resistance to all this, he embraces the process of indoctrination

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and enculturation as a dream state that he considers terra firma – or ground zero, if you will. In this way, he sifts through it to grasp the reality of the fantasy, which brings to mind something distinctly Lacanian: that reality is for those who can't handle fantasy.

Ana

These are interesting connections . . . I had never looked at Gernot's work through the prism of social media or post-truth, probably because I am very skeptical about this narrative – not in the sense that I think social media is great for democracy, but in the sense that I never trusted the media in the first place – social or otherwise. Remember the testimony by fifteen-year-old Nayirah, who told the US Congress that Iraqi soldiers had stolen the incubators from Kuwait's hospitals and left the babies to die on the floor? Or the WMDs? We can go further back in time, but I guess what I am saying is that I believe that what social media makes plain is the shift—which was already underway in popular culture—from the notion of immorality as a deviance from real values to immorality as a celebration of bogus values.

When it comes to Gernot's work, I would say that what I find poignant is the feeling of un-belonging – of being outside looking in – in a world that he didn't make and in which he cannot seem to find his footing. He regards things with a painful nakedness, yet still invests himself emotionally, which is what I was referring to when I brought up cruel attachment ...

Maxwell

That's wonderfully clear. I am perhaps reacting to little murmurs I hear in response to Gernot's work. People talk about the "lies" within his story-telling that obscure what is fact or fiction; they are fascinated by this but quickly fall silent, and I'm looking to develop this awkward silence somehow. And so, I find myself looking at the manner in which he positions himself – as you suggest, he writes from a position of un-belonging. He continually positions himself as moving from one margin to another, from the edge of language (the symbolism of the host) to a ritual or gesture and vice versa (putting into words the feeling of the host stuck to the roof of his mouth and wanting to vomit). The vulnerable position in which he places himself lends his observations a degree of credibility, because he doesn't necessarily benefit from what is revealed in the telling of his experiences – often it's quite the opposite. Do you think his use of poetics and the positioning of himself as a speaking and feeling subject has a value beyond the more obvious emotional, cathartic, and psychological aspects of the work?

Ana

I think Gernot's work forces us to consider a type of suffering for which we do not have a proper grammar. Unlike, for example, when we mourn the death of a loved one – in that case, we are equipped with certain protocols. But he forces us to consider questions that bypass subjectivity and narrative identity and which therefore can only manifest somatically – for example, as a gag reflex in the case with the host.

To give an analogy, the book *Red, White and Black* by Frank B. Wilderson III opens with an anecdote about a Native American sitting on the sidewalk with a sign asking pedestrians to settle their "Land Lease Accounts" – people typically dismissed him as "crazy." Why, the author asks, are the foundational questions of the modern era so scandalous that they are never posed politically? I see Gernot's work as placing a sign inside the art institution that asks viewers why artworks are best described as a form of parapraxis or motivated forgetting – naturalising forms of life lived under the rule of property?¹ How was sadistic cathexis shoved into the public sphere in the first place and what function does it perform there?

¹ David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, New York 2018, p. 77

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Principles, Gernot's work tells us, are best understood in how they are "put to use" – how they are employed and toward what ends. His work is startling because it speaks to the impersonality and intimacy of power, the partial legibility of the artwork, and the scenes of mis-recognition and trauma of which everyday life is composed.

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