

The Twittering machine

We live in a time when progress as an ongoing state of being is one of the biggest values and goals. Seeking it in almost everything we do, from developing new inventions, abilities and perceptions that have never been imagined in the past with the speed we have never reached before, we tend to focus so much on the formula 'improved=different=better=goal', that we often overlook the patterns that keep repeating throughout history in various contexts yet hinting on our common, internalized and to a certain extent even instinctive behaviour.

*homo vestimenta mutat, non mores*¹

Arthur Miller pointed out in his work that through the course of the history, society has been changing on the outside yet internally, in its underlying mechanisms, staying the same because 'that is the way human nature is'.

With the technological boom, we're a part of in the recent decades, a lot has been said about technology being a 'neutral' meaning non-discriminative invention and virtual space as the only real 'equal and free' space allowing every individual to express themselves. Surprisingly enough, its 'dark side' (or better said the dark side of its users) started to slowly leak out of its cracks and gaps, hinting on what Marquis De Sade claimed already in the late 18th century - that "cruelty is at the heart of humanity and indivisible from desire"².

Throughout history, various events confirming such 'psychology of evil'³ occurred. Each different in its execution, their origins seem to have had a common ground. Fear and insecurity together with suspicion are the best fuels of all totalitarianisms, "witch-hunts", and collective hysteria/paranoia, resulting in a "war against everyone".

One of the first infamous examples that happened on a global scale were the actual "witch-hunts" that started to occur on a massive scale from the 15th up until the 18th century, where between a few hundred thousands and 9 millions of people⁴, mostly women were accused of and killed for being "witches", either being tortured, killed or ostracized in case they confessed. Testing the potential 'witches' with impossible tasks such as throwing them in water, proving witchcraft if they knew how to swim, innocence if they drowned was a

¹ translated from latin: man changes his clothes but not his nature, inspired by the latin saying "Vulpem pilum mutare, non mores" (a fox changes its fur, not its nature)

² curator Annie Le Brun on de Sade for "Sade – Attaquer le soleil" exhibition in Musée D'Orsay. I would add that it's important to point out that cruelty is often related to or derives from fear and/or insecurity, taking Marquis' desire into consideration yet not to be taken for granted or recklessly applied to an occurrence whose circumstances are unknown

³ Philip Zimbardo's theory on why "good" people are induced to commit evil

⁴ Ravnjak, V., Verjames v to, kar se ti dogaja (You believe in what is happening to you), a short text for a booklet on The Crucible by Arthur Miller, directed by Janusz Kica in SNG Maribor Theatre

common way of justifying accusations⁵. What's interesting is that during the period of the rise and absolute dominance of Christianity throughout Europe, the Church did not deal specifically with the witchcraft or the remnants of ancient pagan religions, which changed in the 13th Century when it began to lose absolute primacy. Feeling threatened it started looking for "opponents" and "enemies" and consequently dealt with them in the cruellest and most treacherous ways.⁶

Similarly in the late 40s in the United States of America, a "Red Scare"⁷ started to spread. Deriving from the Cold War paranoia the second communist scare started in the late 40s in the United States of America - it became a collective paranoia, characterized by heightened political repression and a campaign spreading fear of Communist influence on American institutions including the infamous Hollywood attacks. Lots of people were accused of being homosexuals, found themselves on blacklists, were imprisoned or forced to flee the country. Orson Welles being among them said in an interview in 1964 that "while many people during the Second World War had betrayed their friends to save their own lives, in the golden age of Hollywood, people did it to save their swimming pools."⁸ Egoistic behaviour aside, what he was pointing out was that even though there were different circumstances and values, the reaction of people was similar.

In 2010 the world was shocked by the information of more than 20.000 children (including newborns) in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo being accused of witchcraft⁹ - Kindoki. The priests performing exorcism are justifying their claims by 'being a part of Congolese tradition'. A lot of the time the children are rejected and accused simply because their parents cannot afford the extra mouth to feed. However, sociologists explain the rise of such beliefs with the weakening of official beliefs - when the latter cannot offer help to their believers in dealing with daily hardships, an interest in the occult and demonic starts to increase.

⁵ This is why the expression 'witch-hunt' is used for any actions where accusations are being justified without any concrete or tangible proofs (or they are made-up), where people being persecuted on account of a collective hysteria or paranoia planted by someone for their own benefit

⁶ Ravnjak, V., Verjames v to, kar se ti dogaja (You believe in what is happening to you), a short text for a booklet on The Crucible by Arthur Miller, directed by Janusz Kica in SNG Maribor Theatre, p.8

⁷ a period of anti-Communist fervor and collective hysteria in the United States that first took place during the World War 1 and repeated in the late 40s, fueled by Joseph McCarthy

⁸ McBride, J., What Ever Happened to Orson Welles?: A Portrait of an Independent Career, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2006, p.105

⁹ Crawford, A., Witnessing 'child witch' exorcism in the DR Congo, BBC News, 2. 3. 2012 [link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-17073332>]

Nevertheless, the loss of faith doesn't necessarily mean only the official belief but also belief in oneself, leading to insecurity. In this case anonymity of the virtual world, especially social media, turns out to be extremely useful in creating the perfect conditions for the infamous frustration-release-chain. Your boss yells at you, you start a fight with your partner, the kid who accidentally left his toy on the floor gets his portion of it and the poor snail gets squashed until it becomes one with the ground. Except, that it's so much easier, faster and more direct when it comes to social media. It goes straight from boss to snail.

The grounds for contemporary "witch-hunts" are therefore mostly made by the online anonymity which enables forms of emotional detachment. Used as an empowering method, twitter storms, trolling, fake news and ideological propaganda are spreading with the speed of light. The only attachment of the users becomes detachment. It is a survival strategy in a world where one can expect to be abused. Together with such fear and insecurity it quickly creates a state of 'gleeful sociopathy' where the ultimate lie easily becomes the ultimate truth.

"Few of us can easily surrender our belief that society must somehow make sense. The thought that the state has lost its mind and is punishing so many innocent people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied."¹⁰

Social media as a space of equality and free thought thus quickly becomes a place where hierarchies are formed and people blow off steam by displacing anger and frustration onto each other using the "freedom of speech" as a justification to terrorize others and satisfy their 'inner sadist'. Back to Marquis De Sade, what would he have to say about it?

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¹⁰ Miller, A., Why I Wrote "The Crucible": An artist's answer to politics, The New Yorker, 14. 10. 1996, [link: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/10/21/why-i-wrote-the-crucible>]