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Corpus Christi – Tactical Embarrasement

Corpus Christi – Tactical Embarrasement, Penitential Pilgrimages, Fundamentalists and Other Gaieties.

1. Clerical Fundamentalists - a Nuisance

In summer 2000, angry clerical fundamentalists were campaigning in Germany against the performance of the avantgarde theatre play „Corpus Christi“ by Terence McNally?, which deals with homosexuality, homophobia and the christian church. Wherever the play was performed, a fundamentalist catholic priest including his followers turned up like a travelling circus. In some cases, christian and muslim fundamentalists formed alliances during these demonstrations. As a reaction, some local theatres in south-Germany put the play on their programme out of solidarity. Some local councils, however, prohibited it, claiming security risks. When the play came to the south-German town of Tübingen, the angry priest placed an advertisement in the local paper to invite citizens to join a rally in the market place. In addition, they could participate in a phone vote for or against „Corpus Christi“. 97% of those who called were opposed to the allegedly blasphemic theatre performance. Thus democratically legitimized, the self-rightous priest expected up to 1000 supporters. Some local leftists remembered their own religious feelings and quickly founded the „Church of Subgenious“ – assuming that the fundamentalist rally could do with some support in the liberal University town of Tübingen.

2. Taking action

On the day, there were only 40 clericals present – plus some dedicated followers of the Church of Subgenious. The fundamentalist priest started speaking to the people, encouraging them to oppose the fat-cats wasting taxpayers money on scandalous theatre plays promoting evil sexual habits, condemning the director of the play whom he insisted in calling „the Jew X“, conjuring up some sort of Jewish-homosexual world conspiracy. Accompanied by the deafening sound of church bells, a small procession of monks in proper habits (courtesy of the local theatre) marched into the market place and drew its circles around the fountain. Under a black canopy, they carried a meaningful object (a white cube). „Thou shalt not let the non-believers live! www.god.de“ a banner called out. A tall, skinny prophet, bible in hand, raised his thundering voice to the people, quoting Hesekiel: „On the fifth day of the forth month of the thirtieth year, when I was staying at the river capron, with those led to the right path, the heavens broke open and god gave me visions“.

Some misguided clericals tried to stop the prophet, but to no avail – he simply thundered through them, while his disciples, being a proper church, missioned the public with pamphlets bearing the word of god – only visible for the real believers though, everybody else only saw white, empty paper. It was a weird day, a weird place – another group of penitential monks made their way in diagonals across the market place, while rhythmically beating their heads with large books. Their habits with big crosses painted on the backs, however, seemed to have derived from the hooded shirts of autonomous thugs. The soundsystem of the clericals was a bit weak – yet the Church of Subgenious had installed their own in one of the residential flats. Specially hired DJs accompanied

the angry speech of the priest with Händel's Weihnachtsoratorium, and the „Halleluja“ went wonderfully with his sermon, just as the Swingle Singers' a capella motettas for the more cheerful parts of his speech.

He, however, in his blindness, and not understanding the aesthetic beauty of rap, turned his volume up, creating some accoustic cacophony. Only when the music stopped now and then, his angry shouting came through. He tried to get people to chant: „We are the people“ („Wir sind das Volk“ - slogan used in 89 to bring down the east-German government). „We are the cross“ (Wir sind das Kreuz) - answered the crowd. And more: „John Paul the Second, we are on your side!“ (Johannes Paul der Zweite, wir sind auf Deiner Seite) in support of The Pope. The clerical outburst against misguided, ill and neurotic homosexuals who need to be shown the path of righteousness, but don't deserve civil rights since they don't produce children, was merrily affirmed: „Wir wollen keine Schwulen, ausser in den Schulen!“ (We don't want gays, in schools they are in place – complete nonsense). The palaver lasted nearly two hours. Neither the clericals nor the Church of Subgenious gave up. The angry priest was rather overwhelmed by all the fuss. His own discourse slipped – what was meant to address the healthy feelings of the local people (gesundes Volksempfinden) turned into a sermon of penitence, permanently re-inforced by chants: „God our father doesn't go to the the-athe“. Pictoresque Tübingen turned into Sodom and Gomorrha, where you can't even say your prayers properly („Nebukadenetzer war ein alter Ketzler“ – Nebukadnetzar was an old heretic).

He didn't like the solemn music either, threatened to cover the place with fire and brimstone plus earthquakes and announced that for the first time ever he would refuse to give his blessings to a place. That was serious. The subgenious DJs changed their strategy. Songs like ACDCs „Hells Bells“ and the Stones' „Sympathy with the Devil“ turned the market-place into a party. „Jesus ist die Liebe, bekämpfen wir die Triebe“ („Jesus is the love, let's fight the urge of flesh“) was the new slogan, while the priest talked about the plague suffered by Christians embodied in the terrorists on the market place, about the evil that had shown its ugly face, and about the angels present, many angels, but also fallen angels... The fallen angels, meanwhile, had a party going, dancing while they made themselves little devilish horns with their forefingers: „Bekämpft das Böse in jeder Möse, bekämpft es ganz – in jedem Schwanz!“ („Fight the evil in every cunt – fight it alltogether in every prick!“) The enemy has shown his ugly face, the priest yelled – and the enemy replied: „Jetzt geht es auf ganze, Jesus war ne Transe“ („Everybody's seen – Jesus is a drag queen“), accompanied by Rocky Horror Picture's „I'm a sweet transvestite“. The party reached its peak with Serge Gainsbourgs „Je t'aime“, when all the „victims of misguided sexual drive“ started dancing closely, when everybody just grabbed anybody, men, women, anything. This was too much for the Christians. „Aren't you ashamed?“ Nobody was. The attempt to close the session by singing the national anthem failed badly, simply because it was aesthetically not acceptable. And while the priest angrily took leave from that fallen city, where religious feelings are kicked to the ground with impunity, without the police doing anything, a last popular song from the critical 70s was played to the public: „Mir geht es wie dem Jesus, mir tut das Kreuz so weh... Und wie der Jesus sage ich mit lachendem Gesicht: Das Leben ist ein Heidenspaß, für Christen ist das nichts.“ (It's a pun: „Kreuz“ in german is the small of the back and The Cross – his „cross“ is aching just like Jesus'. „And like Jesus before me I tell you with a smile in my face: life is just terrific fun (in german: pagan's fun), nothing really for Christians“). The Church of Subgenious finally thanked the public for being there and creating such a nice atmosphere, closing with an invitation to come again. The woman who served the post-penitential Coke & Lemonade in a nearby pub really liked the religious intervention – just like many passers-by who were glad that someone had queered the clerical's pitch.

3. A Tactical Approach to Politics and Performance

A strange action, put together by some people more or less on one evening, on the basis of local knowledge, and anger about the unacceptable demand to let an antisemitic, homophobic, racist and nationalist priest pontificate in their local space. For it wasn't just him, he'd made alliances with the

extreme right republican party, the also extreme right party of bible-believing christians, and the association of free citizens, also a self-righteous extremely conservative group. Katja Hellrath, member of the Church of Subgenious, says: „We were up against a broader, organised, neofascist-racist discourse. The clerical circus had already some reputation for being violent, they'd chucked away the stall of the aids-aid charity in one place. The police was on guard – for once not against us but against our adversaries – who in a way became partners in a beautiful performance to celebrate their own stupidity.“ The activists from the Church of Subgenious were aware that they had no chance to strategically get rid of christian fundamentalists once and for all. Katja Hellrath: „Being only few people anyway, we decided to turn to tactics. We would not disturb or close down the clerical rally, but support it, and thereby making it our own show.“ A tactical approach to the negotiations about hegemony means to act in the space of power, playing with the codes rather than trying to overturn them. Tactics can involve interventions in a specific place and time that are close enough to the local environment to allow many people to agree, or join in on their own account. Local citizens might not be prepared to get rid of fundamentalists in a bottle-throwing way – but they like their local theatre, it provides cultural capital, and they don't like plague and cholera conjured down on them. In a way, the clericals were fair game. Many in that liberal town like to support a spectacle. So when the anti-fundamentalists asked around to find the right place for the soundsystem – high up and away from the grasp of the police - they were sent to people who lived in a flat in the market place. The statement: „we want to support the local theatre“ opened the doors, no questions were asked, and the sound-system was installed in their windows. Of course, the theatre itself provided the habits needed – not quite enough of them, though, some monks had to make do with some kimonos of a secret buddhist. 4. Tactical Embarrasement - Locally Connected

The general idea was a subversive affirmation of the form, but not of the contents. Katja Hellrath explains: „There was no central planning, but quite a few groups and individuals picked up on the general idea. Probably, the clerical priest would have preferred to have his face smashed to become a martyr. We didn't do him the favour, although he would have deserved it with his racist, antisemite and extremely right wing propaganda.“ In fact, it was more effective to use the principle of „tactical embarrasement“. The activists of the Church of Subgenious didn't want to rely on the bogged-down framework of the image „demo-counterdemo“, which isn't tempting anyone anymore. Rather, they created a situation, where the clericals, although they strongly disapproved of the chaos in „their“ rally, had no other choice but acting their part in the subgenious production – and it worked. The prove of the pudding is the laughing effect of the story. But even on the day, it was clear that the „false“ clericals had won when the angry priest suddenly changed his discourse. Instead of merging with the decent local taxpayers, he was forced to drift into condemning them as Sodom and Gomorrha.

His escape into a sermon of penitence was not stupid – he tried to win back the defining power on the show. Yet this turned into a chance to introduce some familiar popular forms – the songs, the closely-danced snoggy blues everybody knows from teenage-times. His strategy was neutralised: Condemning a bunch of sex-obsessed devils for being sex-obsessed devils is plainly embarrassing, especially if they have nothing in mind but being called exactly that. In this action, the trick was to somehow anticipate the counter-strategy of the priest. Everything he might do, would turn into an affirmation of his enemies' performance – the best way to tactically drive him into embarrasement. Instinctively, the „Church of Subgenious“ had put on stage exactly the counter-strategy of the clerical fundamentalist – a procession of penitence, which confusingly turned into a snoggy blues orgy. So in the end, there was even some confrontation. In order to become representatives of Sodom and Gomorrha, it was enough to draw on well-known popular culture with a slight bend. Processions and carneval are well known practices in the catholic parts of the area, travelling preachers are part of protestant long term memory, prophetism always works anyway, parties, dancing and music are part of our desires in daily life. Dennis Kleinfeld, one of the pseudo-monks, explains: „We played the game of the clericals and shamelessly over-affirmed it – until it turned

around. We played with and distorted their codes, ridiculed them and had lots of fun ourselves.“ With this attitude, combined with their skillful use of soundtechnics, the anti-clerical troublemakers gained the audiovisual hegemony in a public space. No wonder the local paper enjoyed reporting about the embarrassment of the clericals, reinforcing it again.

The whole thing in a way was just a happening, a spectacle, a performance, it's outreach was temporary and limited. Yet, it became relevant because it was inserted into a public event and a broader political discourse. Without the clericals themselves, it would never have worked. Local knowledge was crucial in preparing this action. It worked, because it was developed by people who know and are part of local institutions and discourses, who have been working with most of the left and activist groups over the years. So the performance spoke the right language to get support. Dennis Kleinfeld: „Had we restricted ourselves to a rational analysis of homophobia, antisemitism, and the rest, had we ignored the openness of the creative, material gaze, we would have simply ended up distributing leaflets.“ Which would have been less effective, and more importantly, less fun.

based on exchange with fiambreira, rtmark, and an action of the Church of Subgenious July 00