



Dancing Trump

**Why language critique can't explain the American president,
whereas masks and music can**

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2026

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*“You’re apolitical?” said a skeptical friend
sharing a steak with him on the Mar-a-Lago patio.*

“Yeah. I’m apolitical.”

“Let’s make it into music”: Trump dances

Donald Trump, it is said time and again, is not a good speaker. Even Trump critics who acknowledge his phenomenal success agree on this point. Michael Wolff, author of four books on Trump to date, calls him “[m]agical”.¹ However, Wolff claims to have tracked down Trump’s magic using a method that he describes as, “Follow the trail of loose lips saying dumb shit”.² Worth considering. Apparently, language critique does not help us to understand Trump. On the other hand, according to the thesis pursued here along the lines of some pre-modern and pre-psychological traditions,³ his dance provides insight.

On October 15, 2024, Donald Trump attends a town hall event in the swing state of Pennsylvania during the election campaign. Trump arrives an hour later than announced, the audience has been waiting for hours in the fall sun and is dehydrated. Trump is on stage for just over half an hour, talking about natural gas, when a man collapses. Paramedics make their way through the crowd, people sing “God Bless America”, Trump waits. As he continues and answers a question about the “deportation of criminals”, the next person collapses. Trump reacts by saying: “Let’s not do any more questions. Let’s just listen to music. Let’s make it into music. Who the hell wants to hear questions, right? Isn’t that beautiful though? It’s beautiful.”⁴

¹ Michael Wolff: *Landslide. The Final Days of the Trump Presidency*, London 2021, p. 290.

² Michael Wolff: *All Or Nothing. How Trump Recaptured America*, New York 2025, p. 47. On Trump’s “speaking style” Michael Wolff: *Fire and Fury. Inside the Trump White House*, London 2018, pp. 135-137 and 320. Motto on p. 9; *ibid.*, p. 150.

³ Cf. on this Wolfgang Fach: “Dump Trump”. *Das Repertoire der (Un)Möglichkeit-en*, in: *Merkur* 852 (May 2020), pp. 75-82.

⁴ Transcript: www.rev.com/transcripts/trump-town-hall-in-pennsylvania (6/6/2025).

The *Washington Post* described what followed as a "bizarre town hall episode": Trump bobbed and swayed to his campaign playlist for thirty-nine minutes. He danced to nine tracks, shook hands with people on stage and jabbed his index finger at the audience. Kristi Noem, who later became US Secretary of Homeland Security, stands next to Trump, nodding to the beat and clapping along.⁵ Three weeks later, Trump was elected President of the United States for a second time.

This scene brought the "Trump dance" worldwide attention. It has since become a dictionary entry: "The dance is performed by rocking the hips in a side-to-side motion while performing alternating, subdued fist pumps".⁶ However, this is not Trump's first public dance. "It's hard to say exactly how the move originated; over the past decade, no small number of Trump campaign events have harnessed the galvanizing power of impromptu dance",⁷ according to the *New York Times*.

Stage dance is a late phenomenon in Trump's career. However, it is not a "withdrawal from appearance", as Goethe and Adorno described it, an artistic or aesthetic tendency of old age.⁸ On the contrary, Trump's dance is precisely a stepping into appearance, namely into an appearance that, unlike language, does not symbolically refer to something absent that is not itself and that lies beneath or behind it, but which only refers to itself, indeed, *is* entirely itself—and supposedly beautiful as well ("It's beautiful").⁹

⁵ www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/10/14/trump-music-sways-town-hall/; Short version of the scene: www.youtube.com/shorts/pf3km6WDCyw (6/6/2025).

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trump_dance (6/6/2025).

⁷ www.nytimes.com/2024/12/11/magazine/trump-dance.html (6/6/2025).

⁸ "Alter: stufenweises Zurücktreten aus der Erscheinung." Johann Wolfgang Goethe: Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden, ed. by Erich Trunz, vol. 12: Schriften zur Kunst, München 1981, p. 470 (Maximen und Reflexionen, no. 748); Theodor W. Adorno: Spätstil Beethovens, in: id.: Beethoven. Philosophie der Musik, Frankfurt a.M. 2/1994, pp. 180-184, p. 182f.—Cf. fundamentally Sandro Zanetti: *Avantgardismus der Greise? Spätwerke und ihre Poetik*, Paderborn 2012.

⁹ On dance as an "apparition", see Susanne Foellmer: *Am Rand der Körper. Inventionen des Unabgeschlossenen im zeitgenössischen Tanz*, Bielefeld 2009, pp. 35-47. Foellmer draws on Edmund Husserl and Dieter Mersch: *Körper zeigen*, in: Erika Fischer-Lichte, Christian Horn, Matthias Warstat (eds.): *Theatralität*, vol. 2: *Verkörperung*, Tübingen, Basel 2001, pp. 75-89.

Twitter and TV

Of course, it's not as if Trump doesn't know about the power and violence of language. He does. Stage presence plays an important role in his use of language as well as in his dancing. He didn't learn how to perform from just anyone; as Trump recalled, "Sinatra once told me, 'Never eat before a performance'."¹⁰ Trump initially used television as his stage, then Twitter and other social media from 2009 onwards.

The fact that Trump was elected the 45th US President in November 2016, contrary to his own expectations and those of his campaign team,¹¹ was also, perhaps primarily, due to his virtuosic use of Twitter. Twitter enabled Trump to bypass all the gatekeepers of the established print and television media. How Trump has played and continues to play into the hands of the algorithmic logic of the attention economy¹² of social media has been described in detail.¹³ On social media, emotionally arousing content—especially negative emotions—is self-reinforcing, meaning that it spreads many times (around six times) faster than factual reports, for example.¹⁴ John Bolton has spoken of Trump's "Twitter presidency"; accord-

¹⁰ Wolff, *All Or Nothing*, p. 266.

¹¹ "Almost everybody in the campaign [...] thought [...] not only would Donald Trump *not* be president, he probably should not be. [...] 'I can be the most famous man in the world,' Trump told his [...] aide Sam Nunberg [...]. 'But do you want to be president? [...]' Nunberg did not get an answer."—"[W]hen the unexpected trend—Trump might actually win—seemed confirmed, Don Jr. told a friend that his father, DJT, as he called him, looked as if he had seen a ghost. Melania [...] was in tears"; Wolff, *Fire and Fury*, p. 10f. and 18.

¹² "Good attention, bad attention—it didn't make any difference; he'd broken the attention paradigm. All attention was equal and positive"; Wolff, *All or Nothing*, p. 31.

¹³ See, for example Yini Zhang, Chris Wells, Son Wang and Karl Rohe: Attention and amplification in the hybrid media system: The composition and activity of Donald Trump's Twitter following during the 2016 presidential election, in: *new media & society* 2018, Vol. 20 (9), pp. 3161-3182; as narrative: Andreas Barthelmess: *Die große Zerstörung. Was der digitale Bruch mit unserem Leben macht*, Berlin 2020, p. 128-155 (see the chapter "Polarisierung, Social Media und Welt ohne Gatekeeper"). See also Katja Müller-Helle: *Tonalid Drump, Zensur und Deplatforming*, in: *Merkur* 866 (July 2021), pp. 69-76, and Albrecht Koschorke: *Twitter, Trump und die (Ent)Demokratisierung der Demokratie*, in: *Merkur* 856 (September 2020), pp. 5-15.

ing to Bob Woodward,¹⁵ Trump has described himself as “the Ernest Hemingway of 140 characters”.¹⁶

Trump immediately recognized the opportunity that social media offered him when an aide showed and explained Twitter to him in May 2009. Trump pounded the table, shouted “let’s do it[!]” and started tweeting (as @realDonaldTrump, since @DonaldTrump was already taken).¹⁷ When Twitter blocked @realDonaldTrump, despite the reservations of co-founder and CEO Jack Dorsey, after the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, @realDonaldTrump had 88.7 million followers.¹⁸ In November 2022, Elon Musk, the new Twitter owner, lifted Trump’s ban on the platform Musk had renamed to X. On November 5, 2024, Trump was elected President of the United States for a second time.

If Twitter made Trump the US president, then television made Trump the man who became president. Trump—“He’s an extraordinary showman” (Wolff)¹⁹—sees himself as a TV entertainer and producer. When there was a scandal with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the White House on February 28, 2025, Trump’s last words in front of the cameras were: “[Y]ou’re either going to make a deal or we’re out. And if we’re out, you’ll fight it out. [...] All right. I think we’ve seen enough. What do you think, huh? This is going to be great television. I will say that. All right. [...] Thank you.”²⁰ The so-called deal desired by Trump does not materi-

14 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sinan Aral: The spread of true and false news online. In: *Science* 359 (2018), H. 6380, pp. 1146-1151; www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aap9559 (6/6/2025).

15 John Bolton: *The Room Where It Happened. A White House Memoir*, New York et al. 2020, p. 443.

16 Bob Woodward: *Fear. Trump in the White House*, London et al. 2018, p. 207.

17 Maggie Haberman: *Confidence Man. The Making of Donald Trump and the Breaking of America*, New York 2022, p. 171f.

18 www.dw.com/en/donald-trump-loses-social-media-megaphone/a-56158414 (6/6/2025).

19 Apple podcast “The Rest Is Politics” with Rory Stewart and Alistair Campbell, episode 124 (10/3/2025): “The Man Who Got To Trump (Michael Wolff)” (6/6/2025).

20 “Excerpts From the Fiery Exchange Between Trump and Zelensky at the White House,” www.nytimes.com/2025/02/28/us/politics/trump-zelensky-transcript.html (6/6/2025).

alize, and he openly threatens Ukraine with the end of US military support—but he has delivered “great television” either way.

Trump also relied on the power of persuasion and the overwhelming effect of television when he accused South African President Cyril Ramaphosa of genocide against the white population of South Africa on May 21, 2025. Trump had screens brought into the Oval Office specifically for this purpose (“They’ve brought screens, there’s not usually TV in the Oval Office, and they were prepared to do this”, CNN, May 21, 2025²¹). As Trump asked, “Is Natalie [Harp²²] here? Is somebody’s here to turn that? [...] Turn the lights down and just put this on”, the screening of a TV “documentary” (Trump: “we have documentaries”) to substantiate the genocide allegations began in a kind of eerie home theater atmosphere.²³ Like a script that he no longer needs, Trump finally hands the South African president a stack of papers.

Ramin Setoodeh described the extent to which Trump’s career, thoughts and actions have been shaped by television in his 2024 book *Apprentice in Wonderland: How Donald Trump and Mark Burnett Took America Through the Looking Glass*. It begins with the first episode of “The Apprentice”, which was recorded in Trump Tower and broadcast in 2004. When Trump, as he claims, improvised the “catchphrase” “You’re fired!”, the entire Trump Tower began to shake so violently that filming had to be stopped: “When I said, ‘You’re fired!’ the whole building shook,” Trump says of that first episode. “[...] The place just reverberated. People were screaming. They were shouting [...] and they went crazy.” “In fact,” he says, “they had to stop the tape [...], because you can’t have that.”²⁴

²¹ <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/ip/date/2025-05-21/segment/02> (6/6/2025); the following Trump quote *ibid*.

²² On the role of Natalie Harp Wolff, All or Nothing, pp. 32f., 58-50 and 101f. “She has risen to [...] be the most important person around him”, according to Wolff in “The Rest Is Politics”.

²³ <https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-remarks-bilat-cyril-ramaphosa-south-africa-oval-office-may-21-2025/> (6/6/2025).

²⁴ Ramin Setoodeh: *Apprentice in Wonderland: How Donald Trump and Mark Burnett Took America Through the Looking Glass*, New York 2024, 2f.

A brief language critique of Trump's language critique (Michael Wolff)

No question: it takes god-like power to literally trigger an earthquake with a speech act, as Trump claims to have done with the words “You’re fired!” Jesus of Nazareth needed a loud cry and death on the cross to do this (Mt 27, 50-51).

But a powerful, quasi-divine speech act is something different from the language used for it—and Trump’s relationship with language is complicated. The power of language is often both attributed and denied to him. This is what Michael Wolff does at the end of his third Trump book, entitled *Landslide*, when he writes: “Trump has never needed an organization, or infrastructure, or even a plan to make things happen. It happens because of his own stream of consciousness—his own expressiveness makes things happen. He talks. [...] Talks endlessly. [...] Th[at] fact [...] might only reasonably be explained by his absolute belief that his voice alone has reality-altering powers.”²⁵

You have to realize what Wolff is writing here. Words such as ‘speak’, ‘say’ or even just ‘words’ do not appear at all in these sentences; Wolff flatly denies Trump ‘structure’ and ‘plan’. What Wolff attests to Trump is a public “stream of consciousness”, which is of course by definition unstructured and uncontrolled. In addition, Wolff uses the already somewhat derogatory word “talk”, which immediately afterwards, when repeated as “[endless] talk”, is clearly recognizable as similarly pejorative as—here—the word “expressiveness”. In the end, it is not Trump’s language that has “reality-altering powers” (and this may sound mildly ironic here, but is actually nothing more than the textbook definition of a ‘performative speech act’²⁶), but—only—“his voice”: and, with that, all conceptual elements,

²⁵ Wolff, *Landslide*, p. 298.

²⁶ “[A] performative utterance, or, for short, ‘a performative’ [...] indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action [...]. With performative utterances are contrasted [...] ‘constative’ utterances: to issue a constative utterance

however rudimentary, are now excluded, “his voice *alone*”. However, this is not even Wolff’s own explanation of the Trump phenomenon; it is expressly Trump’s own “absolute belief” that, according to Wolff, *could* at best provide a meaningful explanation (“reasonabl[e] [...] expla[nation]”) in the irrealis (“might only”).

Wolff’s sentences quoted here are a miniature masterpiece of malice towards Trump. At the same time, however, they prove him absolutely right. Trump does indeed have “reality-altering powers” that border on the unimaginable. Where he is right, he is right. However, the question remains open as to how much of this power issues from Trump’s language.

The mode in which Trump speaks is that of the apodictic.²⁷ His statements are supposed to be indisputably true. The index finger repeatedly raised towards Ukrainian President Zelensky fits in with this: The outstretched index finger is the gesture of a prophet who has God, justice and truth on his side. John the Baptist preached with an outstretched index finger, depicted on the crucifixion plaque on Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece; Osama bin Laden and Barack Obama have done the same.

A look at the etymology of the index finger, Latin ‘index’, shows how deeply rooted this gesture is culturally. The underlying verb ‘indicāre’ ‘to indicate, discover, make known’²⁸ is related, like the German words ‘zeigen’ and ‘zeihen’, to the ancient Greek ‘δείκνυμι’ [deíknymi] ‘to show’.²⁹ The word ‘δείκνυμι’ in turn is related to the ancient Greek ‘δίκη’ [díkē] ‘right’ and the Latin ‘dicere’ ‘to say’. Etymologically, the ‘jūdex’ is the one ‘who assigns the right [iūs]’ or ‘speaks the right’.³⁰ Whoever

(i.e. to utter it with a historical reference) is to make a statement. To issue a performative utterance is, for example, to make a bet.” John L. Austin: *How To Do Things With Words*, Oxford 1962, p. 6.

²⁷ Or even “suicidally apodictic”; John Burt: *The Lesson of Lincoln in the Age of Trump*, in: Angel Jaramillo Torres, Marc Benjamin Sable (eds.): *Trump and Political Philosophy. Leadership, Statesmanship, and Tyranny*, Cham 2018, pp. 211-233, p. 225f.

²⁸ Cf. the Digital Dictionary of the German Language, www.dwds.de/wb/Index (6/6/2025).

²⁹ See “δείκνυμι”, in: *Greek-German School Dictionary*. Edited by Gustav Eduard Benseler, Adolf Kaegi et al., 16th reprint of the 15th edition of 1931, Leipzig 2004, p. 162f.

speaks 'apodictically' in the sense of ancient Greek 'ἀποδείκνυμι'³¹ [apodeiknymi], as Liddell & Scott define it in their Greek-English Lexicon, "point[s] away from other objects at one, and so [...] point[s] out, display[s], make[s] known, whether by deed or word".³² This in turn is an act of referring that establishes a reference.³³

It is obvious that those who speak apodictically are not necessarily telling the truth, stating facts or being right. At the same time, however, anyone who speaks apodictically *claims* to tell the *truth* or to be honest (Trump: "I'll be honest"), to state facts and to be *right*. He or she therefore presupposes the terms 'truth', 'fact' and 'right', even if he or she speaks 'alternative facts', 'fake news', 'perceived truths'³⁴ or spreads lies or speaks ironically—but not in the case of bullshit, because here the truth value is irrelevant.³⁵ Once again: anyone who spreads 'alternative facts' and 'fake news', lies or speaks ironically necessarily recognizes the existence of truth and facts.

So much for a little language critique of Trump's language critique.

30 "dico", in: Alois Walde: Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch, Heidelberg 2/1910, p. 231f.

31 See "ἀποδείκνυμι", in: Greek-German School Dictionary, p. 88.

32 "ἀποδείκνυμι", in: Greek-English Lexicon (Liddell-Scott-Jones), www.perseus.tufts.edu, Greek Word Study Tool (6/6/2025).

33 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reference/> (6/6/2025).

34 "Research finds that one problematic consequence of being repeatedly exposed to fake news is that, over time, people find it less unethical to share misinformation because it starts to *feel true*. This subjective feeling of something being true, without having any objective proof to substantiate it, is what *The Late Show* host and comedian Stephen Colbert jokingly referred to as 'truthiness'. When defining the term, he said: 'I am no fan of dictionaries or reference books, constantly telling us what is or isn't true! Instead, he challenged the viewer to 'try looking it up in your gut, this is truthiness: truth that comes from the gut, not books'." Sander van der Linden: Foolproof. Why we fall for misinformation and how to build immunity, London 2023, p. 23.

35 "It is [...] th[e] lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit." Harry Frankfurt: On Bullshit, Princeton 2005, p. 33f.—See also Philipp Hübl: Bullshit-Resistenz, Berlin 2018.

Liquidation of meaning and simulacricity (Baudrillard)

According to Arthur Danto, expression and content are two functions of art, in which a tendency can be observed in the twentieth century to overemphasize one function at the expense of the other to the point of its extinction (such as “*pure expression*” in “Abstract Expressionism”). In Danto’s words: “Art is a function of expression and idea, and the recent history of the subject is a comedy in which artists have sought to reduce, in a spirit of purity, one or the other argument of this function to zero.”³⁶ According to Danto, the separation and delineation of the two functions of expression and content—which actually only allow art (and, as Wolff suggests, also political speech³⁷) to emerge through interaction—takes place in a “spirit of purity”. This idea of the ‘purity’ of an extreme value can also be found in the discourse surrounding Trump’s language and dance.

Trump’s dance has been interpreted as the perfection or even the unveiling of his own way of speaking, which tends towards ‘pure sound’ or ‘noise’ (or, as Trump himself says, ‘music’), suggesting that such emanations are no longer language at all. On October 15, 2024, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* wrote online: “Donald Trump is a peculiar campaign speaker. He strings together unconnected sentences and jumps from stick to stick as if his aim is not to convey information but to create a sound. Basically, Donald Trump’s appearances are concerts. So it is only logical that” on October 15, 2024, “Trump simply stopped talking and switched to music entirely. [...] Perhaps on this Monday, Trump’s election campaign found its purest form, the unadulterated sound without distracting mental effort.”³⁸ What is being said here? While language actually by defini-

³⁶ Arthur Danto: Foreword, in: Alan Tormey: *The Concept of Expression. A Study in Philosophical Psychology and Aesthetics*, Princeton 1971, pp. vii-xiii, pp. x and xi.

³⁷ Cf. Footnote 25.

³⁸ “Donald Trump ist ein eigentümlicher Wahlkampfredner. Er reiht unverbundene Sätze aneinander und kommt vom Hölzchen aufs Stöckchen, als ginge es ihm gar nicht darum, Informationen zu übermitteln, sondern einen Sound zu erzeugen. Im Grunde sind Donald Trumps Auftritte Konzerte. Da ist es nur kon-

tion (also) serves to convey information and thoughts, Trump's language is "[disturbed]" and "falsified" precisely by this linguistic function. Only when 'cleansed' of information and thoughts—in Danto's words: "re-duce[d], in a spirit of purity [...] to zero"—does Trump's language find its "purest form".

The *Spiegel* article quoted here not only echoes Danto's purification theorem, but also one of the most popular theorems of postmodernism, namely simulacricity, as described by Jean Baudrillard for the age of "Simulacra and Simulation". In the age of simulation, according to Baudrillard, there is no more "truth, reference, objective cause", a "gigantic simulacrum" no longer refers anywhere to a "real", actually existing thing, presenting itself as "an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference." In Baudrillard's words: "By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning [...]"³⁹ This reads like a prophetic commentary on social media, bots and AI-generated influencers. At the same time, however, Baudrillard's diagnosis is part of a broader intellectual-historical context, namely the widespread discussion of a so-called "crisis of representation". One of its most important key figures is Michel Foucault, who in his book *The Order of Things* described the "crisis of representation" as a signature of modernity, embodied in Cervantes' hero Don Quixote.⁴⁰

sequent, dass Trump" on October 15, 2024 "das Reden schlicht eingestellt hat und ganz zur Musik gewechselt ist. [...] [V]ielleicht hat an diesem Montag Trumps Wahlkampf zu seiner reinsten Form gefunden, dem unverfälschten Sound ohne störende gedankliche Anstrengung." Christian Esch: Und plötzlich macht Trump die Wahlkampfkundgebung zum Konzert, www.spiegel.de/ausland/trump-wahlkampfauftritt-in-oaks-in-pennsylvania-musik-statt-politischer-argumente-a-d65cee18-f2bf-40ab-89a4-df6506c17da8 (6/6/2025).

39 Jean Baudrillard: *The Precession of Simulacra*, in: Jean Baudrillard: *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor 1994, pp. 1–42, pp. 455, 456 and 454.

40 "*Don Quixote* is the first modern work of literature, because in it we see the cruel reason of identities and differences [...] make endless sport of signs and similitudes; because in it, language breaks off its old kinship with things and enters into that lonely sovereignty from which it will reappear, in its separated state, only as literature." Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage Books, 1970, pp. 48–49.

“Reading meaning and depth into Trump” (Maggie Haberman): On the topology of surface and depth

The concept of representation, on the other hand, without which the “crisis of representation”⁴¹ cannot be understood, has both a semiotic and a hermeneutical dimension. The most important conceptual figure of ‘representation’ is the idea of a text or sign *surface* that is open to view and a more or less hidden *depth* of meaning underneath. It can be said that “depth” in the “hermeneutic”, i.e. “meaning”-centered tradition is nothing other than the distinction “between a material signifier as surface and an immaterial meaning as depth.”⁴²

There are an array of theories (which either reject the idea of profundity outright or ostentatiously celebrate the surface for other reasons) that militate against this idea of depth (in which an immaterial meaning is concealed beneath a linguistic or otherwise material surface). One of these critical thrusts comes from pop theory,⁴³ but we can also find this argument, for example, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s plea, “Look for nothing behind the phenomena, they themselves are the lesson.”⁴⁴

41 Cf. fundamentally Kerstin Behnke: *Krise der Repräsentation*, in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 8: R-Sc, ed. by Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Grün-der, Darmstadt 1992, pp. 846-853.

42 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Con-vey*, Stanford 2004, p. 29.

43 Cf. for example Olaf Grabienski, Till Huber and Jan-Noël Thon: *Auslotung der Oberfläche*, in: *ibid.* (ed.): *Poetik der Oberfläche. Die Deutschsprachige Popliteratur der 1990er Jahre*, Berlin and Boston 2011, pp. 1-10, and Ingo Niermann: *Oberfläche*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 227-229.

44 Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Maximen und Reflexionen*, in: *Goethe: Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens*. Munich edition, vol. 17: *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre. Maximen und Reflexionen*, ed. by Gonthier-Louis Fink, Gerhart Bau-mann and Johannes John, München 1991, pp. 715-953, p. 824.—Similarly to Ecker-mann on February 18, 1829: “[T]he sight of a primal phenomenon [Urphänomen] is usually not enough for people, they think it must go further, and they are similar to children who, when they look into a mirror, immediately turn it around to see

So that there is no confusion here: The idea of a pure surface, behind which there is nothing (Danto: "zero") and behind which one should therefore look for nothing, is not an ingenious idea of Goethe's, but a topos that Trump also falls back on.⁴⁵ Historically, it appears again and again where polemics are made against meaning in depth or against 'profundity'. Sometimes surface aesthetics claim exoteric or even 'inclusive' low-thresholdness; this is linked to the accusation against deep hermeneutics that it is esoteric or hieratic and claims exclusivity.

Friedrich Nietzsche polemicized against depth with particular virtuosity. In his "polemic" *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he writes: "[T]here is no 'being' behind the doing, working, becoming; 'the doer' is merely added to the doing—the doing is everything."⁴⁶ This is a life-affirming plea for superficiality. For according to Nietzsche, it is historical depth that inhibits and damages life, depriving it of its Trumpian élan vital, so to speak. For "we" "moderns", as "walking[] encyclopaedias", are incapable of living in the present because "we" are obsessed with a "historical sense", "*in which the living is damaged and ultimately perishes*".⁴⁷

Maggie Haberman, White House Correspondent for the New York Times, also draws on the topos of surface and depth. In conclusion to her 500-page book *Confidence Man. The Making of Donald Trump and the Breaking of America*, she writes, "He works things out in real time in front of all of us. [...] I spent four years of his presidency getting asked by people to decipher why he was doing what he was doing, but the truth is, ultimately, almost no one really knows him. Some know him better than others, but he is often simply, purely opaque, permitting people to *read*

what is on the other side'." Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *ibid.*, vol. 19: Johann Peter Eckermann: Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens, ed. by Heinz Schlaffer, München, Wien 1986, pp. 288f.

⁴⁵ "One of the things that marked Trump's speeches from the beginning of his political career had been his noted lack of interest in attempting the personal background stories that all other politicians seem compelled to include. 'That's phoney stuff. Everybody sees through that bullshit,' he'd told Steve Bannon in 2016." Wolff, *All of Nothing*, p. 291.

⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Zur Genealogie der Moral. Eine Streitschrift*, in: *Werke in drei Bänden*, edited by Karl Schlechta, vol. 2, München 2/1960, pp. 761-900, p. 790.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, in: *ibid.*, vol. 1, München 2/1960, pp. 135-434, pp. 233 and 213.

meaning and depth into every action, no matter how empty”—or “superficial” or perhaps, using Trump’s own expression, “musical”—“they may be.”⁴⁸

Music instead of language

What matters in the context of Trump’s musical dance performance here is the self-reference of a self-contained system of pure superficiality without depth, as Baudrillard attested to simulacricity. It is a revenant of one of the most famous definitions of music. In his book *On the Musically Beautiful. A Contribution to the Revision of the Aesthetics of Musical Art*, the Viennese music critic and theorist Eduard Hanslick writes: “Tonally moving forms are the sole content and object of music.” Hanslick is opposed to a “rotten emotional aesthetic”⁴⁹ and for this reason alone is a vehement opponent of Richard Wagner’s music, which aims to emotionally overpower its audience. For Hanslick, music, especially absolute music, is about nothing other than “beautiful forms without the content of a specific affect”. In the tradition of Kantian aesthetics, Hanslick has the ornament and the arabesque in mind as models taken from the visual arts,⁵⁰ “language-like” (Adorno)⁵¹ musical processes such as Wagner’s leitmotifs are rigorously rejected by Hanslick.

⁴⁸ Haberman, *Confidence Man*, p. 507f. (emphasis not in original).

⁴⁹ Eduard Hanslick: *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen. Ein Beitrag zur Revision der Ästhetik der Tonkunst*, Leipzig 1854, pp. 41 and V. Cf. fundamentally Carl Dahlhaus: *Eduard Hanslick und der musikalische Formbegriff*, in: *Die Musikforschung* 20,2 (April/June 1967), pp. 145-153.

⁵⁰ Eduard Hanslick: *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen. Ein Beitrag zur Revision der Ästhetik der Tonkunst*, Leipzig 13-15/1922, p. 59. “The way in which music can bring us beautiful forms without the content of a particular affect is shown to us quite aptly by a branch of ornamentation in the visual arts: the arabesque.” *Ibid.*—When Hanslick writes “The independent beauty of sound forms here and the absolute dominance of thought over sound as a mere means of expression there are so mutually exclusive that a mixture of the two principles is a logical impossibility” and “everything can be traced back to purely musical determinations, without recourse to puzzling feeling” (*ibid.*, pp. 88f. and 68), he is taking one of the extreme positions mentioned by Danto; cf. footnote 36.

⁵¹ Theodor W. Adorno: *Fragment über Musik und Sprache*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16, Frankfurt a.M. 1978, pp. 251-256, p. 251.

Baudrillard's concept of simulacricity and Hanslick's definition of music both aim to reduce the referential function of language or linguisticity in Danto's sense to zero. Thus, Baudrillard's language loses "truth", "reference" and "meaning", while Hanslick's music loses "content" (which is now only "form" and no longer "drama", "action" or "program"), "expression" and "affect."⁵²

The *Spiegel* article already cited here also follows this trend. According to the article, Trump only creates sound, whereas the issue here should rather be about "conveying information". The accusation is therefore that Trump is retreating into speechlessness; at best, he simulates language when he speaks. Haberman makes a similar point when she insinuates that Trump does not actually have "meaning and depth" behind his "action[s]", but that these are merely "read into" them: and this despite, or because, Trump's actions are in fact – in the spirit of Nietzsche's "there is no 'being' behind doing" – nothing but pure surface.

Political dance: Richard Sennett on Louis XIV

Explanations of Trump's actions or the question of his motives "behind them" (Goethe, Nietzsche), which are bound to the primacy of language—or in line with Jürgen Habermas: of "communication" and "deliberation"—⁵³ do little to help us understand Trump. This is true if only because language is not the exclusive means of political expression. Nobody complained about Louis XIV because he danced, and his nickname "Sun King" is not due to his sunny reign, but to a dance performance by the fifteen-year-old in which he shone like the sun. In fact, Louis XIV's dance

⁵² Hanslick, *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (1922), p. 12.

⁵³ Jürgen Habermas: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Mit einem Vorwort zur Neuauflage 1990, p. 340. Cf. on "discourse ethics", which "binds the validity of norms to the possibility of reasoned agreement on the part of all", insofar as these "assume the role of participants in the argument", *ibid.* pp. 39-41.

and performance have more to do with Trump than his self-proclamation as “King” of New York⁵⁴ would suggest.

In his most recent book to date, published in 2024, *The Performer: Art, Life, Politics*, Richard Sennett writes about Louis XIV and the creation of his “aura as a charismatic figure”: “in Louis’s case, charisma became a physical presence created by art.”⁵⁵ The parallel to Trump lies not so much in baroque “hair-styling and make-up”, but in a political and artistic⁵⁶ performance that manages without words.

Louis XIV serves Sennett as an example—there would be others: “This is not in fact such an unusual story”—of how “political performance presence could be taken to an extreme”, and this explicitly by a “performer [... who] dr[e]w on a repertoire of non-verbal expression.” Sennett argues that the nobility at Louis’ court were tired of chaos and wished for a return to the old order: “Tired of violent disruption, the aristocrats [...] found something reassuring about the royal display of physical prowess, repeated night after night.” Couldn’t the same be said for Trump’s voters, who are fed up with globalization and digital disruption and who listen to Trump’s promises of American reindustrialization day after day? And the parallels go further. Just as Louis danced at court, Trump stages himself in Mar-a-Lago: “[When] Louis danced in public [...] the evenings of dance shift[ed] ‘from the sovereign mingling with his subjects, and among and with them, to the sovereign as director of a choreography centred on himself alone’.”⁵⁷

It is therefore not surprising that Trump sees himself as a sun god and holds himself up as such. Wolff writes in *Fire and Fury*: “[A]nyone who

54 www.nytimes.com/2025/02/19/us/politics/trump-king-image.html (6/6/2025).

55 Richard Sennett: *The Performer. Art, Life, Politics*, Dublin 2024, pp. 117 and 119.

56 The fact that Trump is an artist *sui generis* can hardly be denied. On the artist complex, in addition to the quote 63 and footnote 69, see also Horst Bredekamp: *Der Künstler als Verbrecher. Ein Element der frühmodernen Rechts- und Staatstheorie*, München 2008, where Bredekamp describes, among other things, a scene with Pope Julius II whose “spatially staged theater of punishment and remission of punishment” is reminiscent of the scene with Volodymyr Zelensky in the White House (pp. 28-31 and 65).

57 Sennett, *The Performer*, pp. 117-119.

had proximity to the president had leverage, the more proximity the more leverage. Trump himself you could see as a sort of Delphic oracle, sitting in place and throwing out pronouncements which had to be interpreted.”⁵⁸ This is, once again, the idea of the hermeneutic challenge posed by Trump’s ‘endless talk’, which Wolff illustrates twice here: on the one hand as the scene of a divine oracle in ancient times, and on the other as the medieval feudal practice according to which visible proximity to the ruler determines one’s influence over him.⁵⁹ Following on logically from seeing Trump as a Delphic oracle, Wolff continues: “Or as an energetic child, and whoever could placate or distract him became his favorite. Or as the Sun God (which is effectively how he saw himself), the absolute center of attention”⁶⁰—or, in Sennett’s words referring to Louis XIV: “a Sun King around whom planets of aristocracy revolved”.

Trump’s court and the machinations of his courtiers in New York, Mar-a-Lago and Washington have been described by many but, particularly impressively as a quasi-Shakespearean dynastic drama in Wolff’s *Fire and Fury*. The point here, however, is Trump’s performance, outlined in analogy to Louis XIV.

Mimesis as dance, music and performance (Aristotle)

Right at the beginning of his book, Sennett attests to Trump being a “skilled performer”⁶¹. But what exactly does it mean to be a “performer”—a performer, actor, Latin *actōr* or *mīmus*, Greek *ὑποκριτής* [*hy-*

⁵⁸ Wolff, *Fire and Fury*, p. 70.

⁵⁹ “The pictorial representation of banquets [...] show the lord of the court [...] in the center [...], with decreasing order of precedence to the right and left. [...] It was always a special honor for the guest if the host let him sit next to him or near him.” Joachim Bumke: *Höfische Kultur. Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*, vol. 1, München 1990, p. 251.

⁶⁰ Wolff, *Fire and Fury*, p. 70.

⁶¹ Sennett, *The Performer*, p. xi.

pokritēs] or μῖμος [mîmos]?⁶² Here, too, it is worth looking back to tradition, namely Plato's and Aristotle's theories of mimesis. A glance at the past reveals that Plato and Aristotle already contain the critical evaluations and misunderstandings of language that lie behind the criticism of Trump's language discussed above.

As I have argued, language is not the only medium in which one can express oneself politically or poetically. Like Trump on October 15, 2024, you can “make music”—“He was a musician prevented from making music” (Wolff)⁶³—and dance. Poetry, music and dance: these are precisely the three artistic ‘techniques’ ‘τέχναις’ [téchnais] to ‘τέχνη’ [téchnē]: art, skill, artistry⁶⁴) that Aristotle speaks of at the beginning of his “Poetics” (1447a).⁶⁵ He subsumes all three ‘techniques’ or ‘arts’—poetry, music and dance—under the terms ‘μίμησις’ [mímēsis] or ‘μυμέομαι’ [miméomai], which have long been translated as ‘mimicry’, ‘emulation’, ‘imitation’ or ‘aping’.⁶⁶ Hermann Koller and Jürgen Petersen have extensively criticized this translation tradition and found that the German verb ‘darstellen’ is almost always the better translation. In a passage from Aristophanes, Koller even once translates “μυμήσομαι” [mimésomai] as “*to perform*”, i.e. entirely in the sense of Sennett's concept of the performer, by explicitly “free[ing] himself from dictionary knowledge”.⁶⁷

⁶² “The mimos (μῖμος) was an imitative performance or performer.” “mime”, in: The Oxford Classical Dictionary, Oxford 4/2012, www.oxfordreference.com (6/6/2025).

⁶³ Wolff, All or Nothing, p. 240.

⁶⁴ Cf. ‘τέχνη’, in: Griechisch-deutsches Schulwörterbuch, p. 782; see also ‘τέχνη’, in: Greek-English Lexicon (Liddell-Scott-Jones), www.perseus.tufts.edu, Greek Word Study Tool (6/6/2025).

⁶⁵ Cf. Aristotle: Poetics. Greek/German. Translated and edited by Manfred Fuhrmann, Stuttgart 1996, pp. 4 and 5 (1447a).

⁶⁶ This is also the case in the Greek-German School Dictionary, p. 519. Liddell-Scott-Jones, on the other hand, translates ‘μυμέομαι’ as “imitate, represent, portray”; Greek-English Lexicon (Liddell-Scott-Jones), www.perseus.tufts.edu, Greek Word Study Tool (6/6/2025).

⁶⁷ Cf. Hermann Koller: Mimesis in der Antike. Nachahmung, Darstellung, Ausdruck, Bern 1954, pp. 11-21; Jürgen H. Petersen: Mimesis–Imitatio–Nachahmung. Eine Geschichte der europäischen Poetik, München 2000, pp. 11-17 (“Introduction: Martin Opitz und die Nachahmungsproblematik”). On the history of the word, Koller writes on p. 13: “The word μίμησις [mímēsis] and its derivatives are attested peculiarly late. Homer, Hesiod, the Aeolian poets do not yet know it. [...] The earli-

This is remarkable, and it is important to understand why. *In this concept of mimesis*—if you like: as music, dance, performance—, a *truth or a meaning ‘behind’ or ‘under’ the performance plays no role at all, or more precisely: no role yet.*

Mimesis as imitation, resemblance to truth and deception (Plato)

This, in turn, has to do with the fact that the “basic meaning” of *μιμέομαι* [*miméomai*], as Koller proves on the basis of a number of passages, has (as yet) “nothing to do with deception.” “It is only with Plato,” says Koller, “that *μυεῖσθαι* [*mimeísthai*] in the tenth Book of the State takes on the secondary meaning of ‘representing something untrue’ and the like,” and only a later philosophical reflection, in comparison to the original meaning still largely preserved in Aristotle, “compares the object of mimesis with the underlying ‘truth’.”⁶⁸ In other words, the younger Aristotle represents an older, namely performative, concept of mimesis, whereas the later Plato represents a historically younger, truth-oriented concept of mimesis.

Put differently, only since Plato has it been possible to speak meaningfully of mimesis as a more or less ‘similar’ ‘imitation’. And it is only with Plato that categories such as “unintentional or intentional deception”, “lack of similarity” or “adulteration” (Thomas Mann) come into play⁶⁹; Umberto

est attestation of *μυεῖσθαι* [*mimeísthai*] comes from the Delian hymn, and it is in connection with the dance, from a fragment of Pindar (dance) and from Aeschylus (*μῦθος* [*mîmos*] = actor; actor of a bacchanalian cult).” Koller rejects the idea of ‘imitating’ “realistic dances” (p. 13); cf. on exceptions to Koller’s rule of mimesis “always: bring to representation; never ‘imitate!’” (p. 66) *ibid.*, p. 108.—The following Koller quotation on “Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusen* 850ff.” *ibid.*, pp. 11f.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 13f.

⁶⁹ “Wagnerian, on the level of adulteration [*Verhünzung*]”, was Hitler’s “artistry”; Thomas Mann: *Bruder Hitler*, in: *ders.: Gesammelte Werke in dreizehn Bänden*, vol. XII: *Reden und Aufsätze* 4, Frankfurt a.M. 2/1974, pp. 845-852, p. 848. “Adulter-

Eco even ends up defining “semiotics” as “*the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie.*”⁷⁰ In principle, however, this now established idea of mimesis as imitation and deception is always based on the notion of a ‘depth’ and a ‘behind’, i.e. an immaterial truth or immaterial meaning hidden ‘behind’ or ‘under’ a material surface. The truth lies in the depth, the surface only ‘represents’ it. Conversely, this means that only the truth in the depths enables deception on or through the surface. According to this logic, however, the *pure surface*—like Baudrillard’s simulacry, Hanslick’s absolute music, abstract expressionism or dance—is either *completely deceptive* or *completely free of deception*, depending on your point of view.

Poetics (Aristotle) versus ethics and education (Plato)

With regard to the discussion of guardians in Plato’s *State*, Koller writes about Plato’s “intellectual shaping of the concept of mimesis”: “May the guardians [...] become μιμητικοί [mimētikoí], i.e. actors? “With 395 b [...] a typically Platonic shift in the train of thought sets in. μίμησις, μιμεῖσθαι and its derivatives, which had previously been strictly technical terms for forms of representation, are suddenly given an ethical value. [...] [F]or the first time, the form of representation μίμησις [mímēsis] is confronted with the represented and the representation’s truth content is questioned.” From now on, mimesis is “only” an “imitation”, in which the distance to the truth can be determined. Painting, for example, as a “reflection of the individual object”, which “in turn is only an image” of an “idea”, “has the greatest distance from the truth of the idea.”⁷¹ Koller summarizes: “With all [...] clarity, it becomes clear here that Plato is not con-

ation“ as the “fundamental category of Thomas Mann’s aesthetic theory of fascism” presupposes, as Hermann Kurzke has noted, “the distinction between the genuine and the corrupt”. Hermann Kurzke: “‘Brother’ Hitler: Thomas Mann and the Third Reich”, in: Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch 71 (1990), pp. 125-135, p. 131.

⁷⁰ Umberto Eco: *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington 1976, p. 7. On this statement and its tradition, see Dieter Mersch: *Medientheorien zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2006, pp. 22-27.

cerned with poetics (in the Aristotelian sense), but with a theory of education.”⁷²

This brings us full circle to Trump. After all, the accusations repeatedly made against him are, on the one hand, that he lies (i.e. distorts the truth into its opposite),⁷³ and, on the other, that his language itself is too far removed from the truth (Plato with Koller) by becoming ‘mere sound’. These accusations, however—this constitutes the crux of the argument made here—are based on the Platonic model of mimesis, in which what was poetics before Plato and until Aristotle has now become ethics. Poetics, one could say, does not care about truth, or in Nietzsche’s words from *The Gay Science*: “For as Homer says: ‘Much indeed the singers lie!’”⁷⁴ In this sense, Trump is a singer and dancer, or a performer, against whom platonic, ethically motivated criticism, which is concerned with truth and language, slips away.

We cannot simply respond to Trump’s Teflon-like quality by asserting that politics is a practice that revolves around truth and arguments as well as—at least in Habermas’ idea of liberal democracy—discourse and deliberation. Of course politics is such a practice, although to varying degrees, depending on the historical point of view. In fact, Habermas himself has wondered whether his theory of the deliberative public sphere still applies in the age of social media.⁷⁵ Either way, non-linguistic political

⁷¹ Koller refers here (Die Mimesis in der Antike, p. 73) to the beginning of Book X of Plato’s *State* (595a–598d). Towards the end of this discussion it says with reference to painting: “Πόρρω ἄρα πού τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἡ μιμητικὴ ἐστὶν καὶ”; “So far from the truth is the imitation”; Plato: *Πολιτεία*. The State, in: Works in Eight Volumes. Greek and German, 4th volume. Edited by Dietrich Kurz. [...] German translation by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Darmstadt 1971, pp. 802 and 803 (598b).

⁷² Koller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike*, pp. 17, 63f. and 17f.

⁷³ Cf. e.g. Haberman, *Confidence Man*, p. 91. Mary Trump notes that Trump also lies for the sake of making a story sound better: “As usual with Donald, the story mattered more than the truth, which was easily sacrificed, especially if a lie made the story sound better.” Mary L. Trump: *Too Much and Never Enough*. How My Family Created the World’s Most Dangerous Man, London et al. 2020, p. 7.

⁷⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in: Werke in drei Bänden, ed. by Karl Schlechta, vol. 2, München 2/1960, pp. 7–274, p. 94 (2nd book, no. 84).

⁷⁵ See Jürgen Habermas: *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik*, Berlin 2022.

practices and performances should not be overlooked or even suppressed simply because they seem strange, incomprehensible or unappealing. If Trump is obviously as convincing as he is, but not convincing with arguments, then there must be an explanation beyond the argument. The thesis here is that such an explanation is, among other things, visible in Trump's dancing.

Voice and hypocrisy

The statement by Michael Wolff quoted above about Trump's "absolute belief that his voice alone has reality-altering powers" is in the tradition of Plato insofar as the 'mere voice' is the limit value of language at which, from a Platonic perspective, it loses its actual, i. e. truth-telling, function. As a 'sound', the 'mere voice' is nothing but a linguistic surface and therefore at best of a 'purely' musical quality.

Here too, Aristotle thinks differently from Plato, and here too his argument is similar to that of Sennett's "performer". "A trace" of the old, pre-Platonic mimesis⁷⁶ can be found once again with Koller, "in Aristotle's Rhetoric 1404.20", where Aristotle refers to the position of Glaucon of Teos (1404a). "As in poetry," says Koller, "there is also in rhetoric an ὑπόκρισις [hypókrisis], an art of performance." In Koller's translation, Aristotle says: "The ὑπόκρισις is in the voice, as it must be used for each pathos, whether loud or medium-strong, for the pitches, whether high, low or in the middle register, and which rhythms are suitable for each pathos. There are three"—here I would point out: musical—"points [...]: namely strength, harmony, rhythm." Shortly afterwards, Aristotle says, and one can hardly believe one's ears: "[']words are means of expression [...], but the voice is the most important of all our means of expression".⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Cf. note 68.

⁷⁷ Koller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike*, pp. 55f. Koller's interpretation depends heavily on the wording of his translation. Gernot Krapinger translates the last sentence as follows: "Words are imitations, and we also have the voice, the part of the body that is most capable of imitation of all." Aristotle: *Rhetoric*. Translated and edited by Gernot Krapinger, Stuttgart 1999, p. 154 (1404a). The Aristotelian wording is: "τὰ γὰρ ὀνόματα μιμήματα ἐστίν, ὑπῆρξεν δὲ καὶ ἡ φωνὴ πάντων μιμητικώτατον τῶν

It is important to realize what kind of assertion Aristotle is making here. “Voice” or “sound” is more important than “words” or their truth or meaning. This is the logic of the concept of mimesis referred to by Aristotle in the sense of ‘hypókrisis’, which stands for ‘performance technique’ in a completely value-neutral way. In view of what has been said so far, it is therefore obvious that it was only with Plato’s question about the truth in mimesis that the word ‘hypocrisy’ could take on its meaning of ‘feigning’ and ‘dissimulation’, which is still valid today, and then be used against Donald Trump, for example.⁷⁸

Platonically speaking, hypocrisy is an ethical accusation. In pre-Platonic terms and still understood with Aristotle, it is a descriptive term for ‘performance technique’. But this is precisely what Sennett is concerned with when he looks at Louis XIV: “At the very pinnacle of power [...] the performer had to draw on a repertoire of non-verbal expression.”⁷⁹ “The concept of truth”, once again with Koller, “finds no starting point here”.⁸⁰

A tie instead of soul. James Joyce’s superficiality

Two different historical mimesis theories can be used to interpret what Trump does as a dancer, performer or μῦθος [mîmos]. On the one hand, there is the Platonic, ethical and truth-oriented tradition in which the majority of Trump’s critics stand. On the other hand, there is the non-ethical, in Nietzsche’s sense “extra-moral[]”⁸¹ tradition, which explicitly refrains

μορίων ἤμῳ”; Aristot. Rh. 3.1.8 (Ars Rhetorica. Aristotle. W. D. Ross. Oxford. Clarendon Press. 1959); www.perseus.tufts.edu (6/6/2025). The word ‘ὑπόκρισις’ is used by Aristotle ibid. in Rh. 3.1.8 (1404a), Krapinger translates “manner of delivery” (p. 153).

⁷⁸ Jan-Werner Müller: “Yes, Trump is a hypocrite. But is pointing that out an effective attack? Charges of hypocrisy do not land if the supposed hypocrite is not committed to any kind of consistency in the first place”; www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/04/trump-hypocrisy (6/6/2025).

⁷⁹ Sennett, The Performer, p. 119.

⁸⁰ Koller, Die Mimesis in der Antike, p. 56.

from ‘words’ and their ‘content’, from ‘meaning’ and ‘truth’ and instead focuses on the ‘superficial’ representation itself—similar to what you do when you listen to music or watch a “wallpaper” pattern⁸² or a dance.

Those who lean towards the latter theory must also be skeptical of psychological explanations of Trump’s behavior. In contrast to early modern behavioral theories such as those of Baldassare Castiglione, Baltasar Gracián or the so-called French moralists, the psychological (and not just the ‘deep’ psychological) gaze is always directed into the depths and to what is hidden there when it searches for the unconscious, the past, the absent or even the soul.

We know from an anecdote by James Joyce that this is not everyone’s cup of tea. This is a classic example of a plea for the surface as a polemic against depth, the topicality of which was already discussed above. Joyce sits for a portrait. “When the painter Patrick Tuohy began to talk about the importance of capturing the Joycean soul, he muttered darkly: ‘Never mind my soul, Tuohy. Just make sure you get my tie right’.”⁸³

The fact is what is currently being performed

But it’s not just those who want to portray Joyce who should look at their ties and surfaces. The rule also applies to Trump. In fact, Trump himself is an observer and thinker of the surface. Maggie Haberman also sees it that way. She has described how Trump infers his existence from the public visibility or performance of something. This was the logic during the

⁸¹ Friedrich Nietzsche: Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne, in: *Die Geburt der Tragödie. Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen I-IV*. Nachgelassene Schriften 1870-1873. Kritische Studienausgabe, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, München 1988, vol. 1, pp. 873-890.

⁸² Immanuel Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. by Karl Vorländer, Hamburg 7/1990, p. 179 (§ 51).

⁸³ www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/05/james-joyce-biography-bowker-review (6/6/2025).

Corona period, for example: If you discuss the dangers of the COVID virus on an open stage, you create them in the first place; if you don't talk about the dangers, you make them disappear.

According to Haberman, something is true, factual or existent for Trump *because* it is being performed or discussed in public at the moment, but only *for as long as* it is being performed or discussed. She writes: "Trump had always appeared to believe that things only existed if they were discussed openly, and he set about minimizing the [COVID] virus in public, despite private warnings from National Security Council team that it was significant and from aides such as Kellyanne Conway and Brad Parscale to treat it seriously."⁸⁴ Once again: for Trump, according to Haberman, *whatever is being performed* and is therefore visible is true or *fact*. Truth as a show in real time, live: this is either the most extreme performative concept of truth and fact imaginable—or none at all.

Mugshot and mask. Trump's official portrait

Music and dance can be ambiguous and ambivalent. Truth, as it has traditionally been understood by philosophy and democracy, cannot. "Post-truth philosopher[s]" such as Bruno Latour and a number of other 'constructivist' or even 'deconstructive', primarily postmodern thinkers are the exception that confirm this rule.⁸⁵ To give an example of the ambivalence of music: Lorenzo da Ponte's opera libretto *Così fan tutte* revolves around erotic entanglements, immoral relationship experiments and marital deceit. Mozart wrote the appropriate 'erotically vibrating'⁸⁶ music to accompany it. However, this did not stop an anonymous

⁸⁴ Haberman, Confidence Man, p. 414.

⁸⁵ Cf. e.g. Ava Kofman: Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science, in: www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/magazine/bruno-latour-post-truth-philosopher-science.html (6/6/2025).

⁸⁶ This expression is similar, albeit following Baudelaire's "Je sens vibrer en moi toutes les passions" and with a view to Wagner, in Richard Dreyfus: Wagner and the Erotic Impulse, Cambridge and London 2010, p. 23.

arranger from turning the musical material from *Così fan tutte* into a Catholic mass, the “Mass after *Così fan tutte*” in C major; Köchel-Verzeichnis Appendix 235e. One is amazed when listening to it, but has no objections to the relationship between the music and the mass text.

Trump is also a master of ambivalence, and not only when he translates a Q&A format into music. There is no question that Trump has brought iconic formulas of unambiguously heroic pathos to the stage with legendary flair and courage, for example in the assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania on July 13, 2024. At the same time, however, Trump is also a master of ambivalence. This can be seen in the official portrait of the 47th US President taken by Daniel Torok (which was replaced by another at the beginning of June 2025⁸⁷). Kelly Grovier described this first Trump II portrait as follows: “Carefully choreographed, every aspect of the official photo is calibrated for maximum impact—from the almost metallic, crepuscular light in which Trump’s face is ignited from below to his severe, asymmetrical squint.” Grovier takes the “fiercely furrowed, lock-eyed, and, yes, trumpant glare” as an opportunity to compare Trump’s portrait with a painting by the Italian Baroque painter Salvator Rosa entitled—of all things—“Philosophy”.⁸⁸

However, Trump’s gaze in particular also brings to mind iconological references to antiquity. Eric Csapo writes about the almost frontal head pose that Trump shows in his portrait:

Archaic and Classical Greek iconography almost never show frontal faces [...].[] One exception is certain predatory beasts: the Gorgon whose sight turns her victims to stone; the snake whose name seems to come from its fierce glare (δέρκομαι, δράκων [dérkomai, drákōn]);[] the sphinx; the siren; the owl which mesmerizes its victims (and is even said to kill them with its fiery gaze);[] the lion and especially the panther (or *pardalis*). The latter’s “bright eye”

⁸⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/06/03/politics/trump-new-official-portrait-white-house>; www.nytimes.com/2025/06/04/arts/design/trump-portrait-presidential.html (6.6.2025).

⁸⁸ www.bbc.com/culture/article/20250120-donald-trumps-official-portrait-the-17th-century-painting-that-unlocks-this-mysterious-image (6/6/2025).

has “shining pupils which beneath their lids emit a steely glare (γλαυκιδόωσι [glaukiódōsi]) [...] What these animals all have in common is just this paralyzing “steely glare,” *glaukotes*, a quality connected with the name of the owl (*glauks*), and associated [...] with the war-goddess, “steely-eyed” (*glaukopis*) Athena [...]”.⁸⁹

Trump as a steely-eyed predator: this is another interpretation of his portrait. However, there is also the striking similarity between the (first) official Trump II portrait and his mugshot taken in the Fulton County Sheriff’s Office on August 24, 2023 (which he had rehearsed and practiced for days and with which he was highly satisfied⁹⁰). In fact, Daniel Torok’s portrait not only seems to quote the mugshot (which was hanging on the wall outside the Oval Office anyway)⁹¹, but looks like a photoshopped version of it.

But how is it possible for a mugshot to become a presidential portrait, and what does that mean? Once again, Sennett provides a clue: they are masks.

Masks and power

Sennett writes: “Machiavelli’s great essay *The Prince* argues that a ruler must be an actor in order to survive.” If the prince were to communicate his political intentions openly, his subjects would not obey him. According to Machiavelli, in order to gain the freedom to act rationally in the political theater, the prince must act unpredictably in front of the curtain and

⁸⁹ Eric Csapo: Riding the Phallus for Dionysus: Iconology, Ritual, and Gender-Role De/Construction, in: *Phoenix* 51,3/4 (Autumn-Winter) 1997, pp. 253-295, p. 256.

⁹⁰ “He’d been practicing it for days—on the golf course, in the mirror, in front of the legal team, and among Bedminster members. [...] He was in and out in no time—with the mug shot taken in an instant. But he was over the moon: He loved the picture. ‘This looks so cool, this is a classic, this is iconic,’ he kept pronouncing. [...] ‘What’s the caption?’ he asked. [...]—‘Never surrender!’ Trump added.” Wolff, *All of Nothing*, p. 55f.

⁹¹ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-mug-shot-hung-oval-office-photos-show/story?id=118829928> (6/6/2025).

distract the audience from his politics with sudden changes of direction. Sometimes he should act angry and instill fear in his subjects, at other times he should caress them like a loving father. “What will the Prince do or say next? The people”, “swept away by disturbances”, “can’t predict”. “The Prince keeps his subjects riveted by a persona which, because it is shape-shifting, never becomes stale.” According to Sennett, the Prince benefits from the ability to play several roles at the same time. Simultaneously, however, “something new has appeared in this role-playing adult: the Prince doesn’t wholly surrender to his performance. It is a mask.”⁹²

Sennett, and this should not be concealed here, explicitly distinguishes Trump’s behavior from that of the Machiavellian prince: “demagogues like Donald Trump are not best described as Machiavellian; the Prince swaps masks at will, whereas Trump believes his own fantasies and is deeply invested in a single role.”⁹³ Based on the argument developed so far, it could be argued against this statement by Sennett that a stable “role” maintained over time would be a uniform “‘being’ behind the doing” assumed “behind” or “under” the different masks, to use Nietzsche’s words once again. In Trump’s case, on the other hand, there is much to suggest that his assumed mask is identical to the role portrayed in each case—even if only until he puts on a different mask and role, and so on. In Haberman’s words: “He works things out in real time in front of all of us.”

Seen in this light, there are two different ways of reading mugshots and presidential portraits. Following Sennett, the presidential portrait resembles the mugshot in order to refer to the same Trumpian role of “metallic”, “maximum impact” in contexts conceivably far removed from one

92 Sennett, *The Performer*, p. 29f. In terms of mask theory, Sennett is in line with Csapo, *Riding the Phallus for Dionysus*, p. 255. However, Sennett does not say which passages in “The Prince” he is relying on. In any case, ‘mask’ and ‘playing’ are Machiavelli interpretations that also depend on the translation. The original reads: “Essendo adunque un principe necessitato sapere bene usare la bestia, debbe di quella pigliare la volpe ed il liono; perchè il liono non si difende dai lacci, la volpe non si difende da’ lupi. Bisogna adunque essere volpe a conoscere i lacci, e liono a sbigottire i lupi. Coloro che stanno semplicemente in sul liono non se ne intendono.” Niccolò Machiavelli: *Il Principe*, ed. by L. Arthur Burd, Oxford 1891, p. 302f.

93 Sennett, *The Performer*, p. 30.

another—defendant in the Fulton County Sheriff’s Office, US President in the White House—, signaling: Trump is Trump, and Trump remains Trump. Regardless of the circumstances, you can rely on him to maintain his role, personality or character, you could also say that he remains true to his role (although the word ‘true’ itself raises doubts as to whether this thesis is correct).⁹⁴ Alternatively, the mugshot and the presidential portrait are so similar that one can recognize one and the same mask, but not whether it refers to a suspected criminal or to the American president or to both at the same time. In this case, the two portraits, which are so similar, do not indicate uniformity and stability ‘behind’ the face shown, but stand for nothing but ambivalence, one could also say: for Trump’s Janus-facedness.

Janus and Dionysus, the fecal version

Right at the beginning of his book *The Performer*, Sennett writes under the subheading “Janus Presides”: “When someone is called ‘Janus-faced’ it usually means that they are dishonest; the face presented to the world is not who the person really is.” ‘Janus-faced’, as the word is understood here, is therefore a synonym for ‘mimetically untruthful’ in the Platonic sense. But according to Sennett, there is another way to look at it: “The Romans thought differently about Janus. He was a god of transitions, of passages, of possibilities”, hence the name “January” for the first month of the year. Sennett continues: “[T]his indeterminacy has its good side. Performing art made in the good spirit of Janus focuses on process rather than a finished and fixed product. [...] If Janussian art is open, it is not formless.”⁹⁵ ‘Performing’ with a focus not on the result, but on the open

94 “‘She fucking hates him,’ said one Mar-a-Lago patio confidant of Trump and his family” about Melania Trump; Wolff, *All of Nothing*, p. 274.—“Machiavelli’s interest in the theater [...] was deep. He was the author of plays such as *Mandragola*, which anatomized how to get away with infidelity in domestic life. We can only infer that he might have thought deceiving a husband or wife deploys the same skills as those which can gull the public.” Sennett, *The Performer*, p. 30.

95 Sennett, *The Performer*, p. x.

process that is also open to sudden reversals⁹⁶: what would that be if not a description of Trump? Haberman's "He works things out in real time in front of all of us" is a definition of Trump's "Janussian art".

As I mentioned earlier, ambivalence undermines truth and factuality. This kind of ambivalence can be an aesthetic program, or a political program, or both, for example in drag performances, which Judith Butler described in *Gender Trouble* as a programmatic subversion of gender identity.

Steven Bannon also has an interest in using ambivalence to undermine truth and factuality. His notorious statement, "The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit",⁹⁷ calls for this ("the way to deal with them is ...") and practices it in one breath (depicting the media—which actually serves as the checks and balances—as the opposition). In so doing, Bannon also takes part in an ancient tradition.

This reference takes us back to antiquity: Bannon vulgarly invokes the flow of "shit" in a way that recalls the function that wine once played among the ancient Dionysians. The followers of Dionysus indulged in wine to turn the prevailing order upside down through ambivalence—albeit only temporarily, unlike Bannon and his fellow travelers. "Dionysus," says Eric Csapo, "operates as the principle that destroys differences[]". "He does so by temporarily merging opposites and rendering them paradoxical."⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Cf. note 101.

⁹⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/16/media/steve-bannon-reliable-sources> (6/6/2025); cf. on the "strategy: Flood the zone" Wolff, *All or Nothing*, p. 254.

⁹⁸ Csapo, *Riding the Phallus for Dionysus*, pp. 254f.

What is the inversion of truth against the abolition of its possibility?

However, those who abolish differences and create ambivalence are not (no longer) only replacing facts and truth with alternative facts, fake news and lies, but also making the distinction between ‘truth and untruth’ or ‘structure and anti-structure’ itself impossible.

Csapo writes: “[The principle that destroys differences] confuses structure and antistructure to indistinguishability. The argument of antistructure may well be the same as structure. But the [...] [Dionysian] product is not [...] the negation of structure, but a denial of the possibility of affirming or negating it, not inversion, but confusion.”⁹⁹

It is precisely this impossibility of distinguishing between affirmation and negation or subversion, and the resulting confusion, that characterizes Trump’s Dionysian behaviour in this sense. He is not, as has sometimes been said, his own caricature. For he can be neither exaggerated nor ironized.

Without wit or irony: Trump rescues kittens

On September 11, 2024, Jimmy Kimmel made fun of Trump on his show “Jimmy Kimmel Live”. “‘So much insanity [...]’ Kimmel said. ‘On the day of the debate he’s posting cat memes. [...] These memes are part of what might be the dumbest Republican lie yet,’ he added, referring to the rumor [about Haitian immigrants eating people’s pets in Springfield, Ohio] spread by Trump’s running mate JD Vance.”¹⁰⁰ “Insane”, “dumb”, “lie”:

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 287.

Kimmel and his laughing audience don't understand that these terms slide off of Trump, the Janus-faced, Dionysian, dancing performer. Like Janus, Trump looks and speaks and dances in one direction and at the same time in the other.¹⁰¹

Ironically, however, Trump thereby undermines the very possibility of making him the subject of wit, irony¹⁰² and satire. For Trump there is 'iconic',¹⁰³ but not 'ironic'.¹⁰⁴ Apart from Jimmy Kimmel and a few other late-night talkers, nobody actually laughs today when Trump publicly shares his "stream of consciousness" (Wolff), dances or posts AI-generated images to the prompt "Trump saving cats from hungry Haitians". The final irony of the age of retweets and memes, which Trump helped to create and accelerate enormously, is the self-abolition of irony.

No matter how apodictically Trump speaks, contradiction and caricature are no longer possible—except as another form of approval. Anyone who *talks about* Trump on social media today *speaks for* him. In the social media cosmos of the Trump era, reacting is applauding. This is how Trump gets what matters to him alone: "attention" and "headline, headline, headline" (Michael Wolff¹⁰⁵).

100 www.yahoo.com/entertainment/dumbest-republican-lie-yet-jimmy-095348214.html (6/6/2025).

101 Wolff calls Trump "a chaotic, ad hoc, impulsive president moved principally by the sound of his own voice and by the last random person to have gotten his ear." Wolff, *All or Nothing*, p. 277. In the podcast "The Rest Is Politics", Wolff says: "of course he didn't build that wall. And even here, again, it will go, he will snatch children from their mothers until he doesn't. And then that's reversed."

102 The fact that irony depends on truth is also expressed in a "brief and enigmatic marginal note" by Luther on the passage he translated, John 18:28-40, in which Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate, who asks the famous question "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Luther writes: "What is truth? Irony is. If you wish to speak the truth / then you are lost (Was ist warheit. Ironia ist. Wiltu von warheit reden / so bistu verloren)." Jochen Hörisch: *Theorie-Apotheke. Eine Handreichung zu den humanwissenschaftlichen Theorien der letzten fünfzig Jahre, einschließlich ihrer Risiken und Nebenwirkungen*, Frankfurt a.M. 2010, p. 10 (without reference to Luther).

103 Cf. note 90.

104 Wolff writes about a conversation with Trump: "'I'm thinking of calling this book *Landslide*,' I offered, only slightly concerned that he might read the irony. 'Cool title. The other title I gave you, *Fire and Fury*,'" Wolff, *Landslide*, p. 304.

105 Podcast "The Rest Is Politics".

The fact that it has come to this also owes to the misunderstanding that the current argument seeks to debunk. Sennett summarized it laconically. “People are constantly asking: How can people believe in this nonsense? But it’s not about words.”¹⁰⁶

But then what is it about? Trump, as his mugshot from the Fulton County Sheriff’s Office (which has been ennobled as an official presidential portrait) shows, is a performance artist who is a virtuoso of that Janus-faced masking that pre-Christian antiquity celebrated as a promise not of reality but of possibility—even if, as in Trump’s case, it is nothing but “greatness”. One thinker who would have liked this is Martin Heidegger. In 1927—almost four decades before his *Spiegel* gnomic declaration, “Only a God can save us”—he wrote¹⁰⁷ in § 7 of *Sein und Zeit*: “Possibility is higher than reality.”¹⁰⁸ Following *Sein und Zeit*, one might ponder whether this is a contribution to Trump’s “substance” or, in German, his “Substanz”.¹⁰⁹

106 www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/autoren/buch-von-richard-sennett-den-erfolg-unerschuetterlicher-selbstdarsteller-verstehen-110081345.html (6/6/2025).

107 “Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten”. *Spiegel* interview with Martin Heidegger on September 23, 1966, in: *Der Spiegel* 23/1976, pp. 193-219.

108 Martin Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen 11/1967, p. 38—Aristotle’s “Poetics” already states that “poetry” is something “more philosophical and more serious than historiography” because, unlike the latter, it does not communicate “what really happened” but “what is possible according to the rules of probability or necessity.” Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 29 (1451a-b).

109 Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 90 (§ 19).

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