

Counterfactual Imaginations, Symbolism, and Poetic Language as Part of Populist and Manipulative Rhetoric

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Abstract

Our research is part of a broader project focusing on manipulative representations in times of crisis and the analysis of linguistic strategies used to spread alternative truths in the public sphere. Culture and poetic language are among the less explored topics in political and opinion-forming rhetoric disseminated via the internet and social media. Based on a collected text corpus from online magazines objectively identified as alternative media in German-speaking countries, we will attempt a linguistic and cultural analysis of the key images, symbols, and overall poetic language used to convey alternative or manipulative narratives. We first process the analyzed corpus using corpus analysis methods and techniques and the Sketch Engine tool (identification of keywords and collocations); second, we combine this with a critical discourse analysis approach; and third, we focus on the analysis of poetic language using literary criticism. The aim is to highlight the typical elements of the language and rhetoric in question and thus help to better understand its functioning and ability to persuasively influence recipients. Such disclosure of typical linguistic and argumentative structures and their overlap with the aesthetic level can contribute to sensitizing the perception of these phenomena and to the better development of critical thinking in civil society.

Keywords: engaged poetry, Manova, corpus analysis, linguistic manipulation, literary analysis

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Introduction

This study is part of a larger research project in which we examine the phenomenon of manipulative representations in times of crisis in the German- and Slovak-speaking countries. In this context, we have so far analyzed various aspects of conspiracy discourse. In our research, we have focused primarily on political language and alternative media, with particular emphasis on identifying specific characteristics of conspiracy discourse and the linguistic strategies used in the dissemination and instrumentalization of conspiracy theories and alternative truths (see, e.g., Demčišák, 2024; Demčišák, 2025; Frašítková, 2024; Frašítková, 2025; Schuppener, 2025, and many others). Both in our analyses and in the existing research literature on this phenomenon in general, little attention is paid specifically to poetic language. This may be because literary and poetic language is not primarily associated with conspiracy discourse, and because this language is granted, a priori, an artistic and creative license that shifts it into the realm of the fictional, where non-factual narration is even directly presupposed.

However, the corpus we analyzed contains evidence showing that poetic language and poetry can become a self-chosen form of expression within alternative discourse. Specifically, we can demonstrate this using the example of the online magazines Rubikon and Manova, which feature a literature section and maintain an independent “Literature Salon” column. Since March 2021, the literary editorial team has also been running the “Poetry Corner,” which continues to the present day. In our analysis, we focus primarily on texts published between 2021 and 2023; in total, there are 23 “Poetry Corners” from this period, containing texts by at least 35 authors, including some anonymous works and texts written under pseudonyms. Overall, we approach the analyzed text material from three perspectives—from the perspective of quantitative corpus analysis and collocations, from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, and from the perspective of literary studies and literary criticism.

An Approach Based on Word Frequency and Collocation Analysis

When we examine the analyzed corpus of poetic texts from the perspective of corpus analysis and look, for example, at the 50 most frequent nouns (see Figure 1), we find that, unlike texts that are primarily political in nature and originate from newspaper sections on politics, society, media, etc., they contain far fewer flagship and stigma words that might be typical of a populist conspiracy discourse. As such, words like *war*, *apparatus*, *fear*, *control*, *enemy*, *power* (stigma words) or *freedom*, *peace* (flagship words) can be partially identified. Instead, the discourse is dominated by terms that we might, in a certain sense, describe as philosophical – such as *human*, *time*, *world*, *God*, *death*, *heart*, *spirit*, *happiness*, *soul*, *love*, *light*, *word*. There is a predominance of abstract and transcendent concepts that relate to the grand and eternal themes of human life and can inspire reflection. However, this preference may also suggest a certain pathos.

We gain further insight by examining the collocations of these seemingly neutral words. Figures 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the linguistic contexts of the three most common terms: *human* (Figure 2), *time* (Figure 3), and *life* (Figure 4).

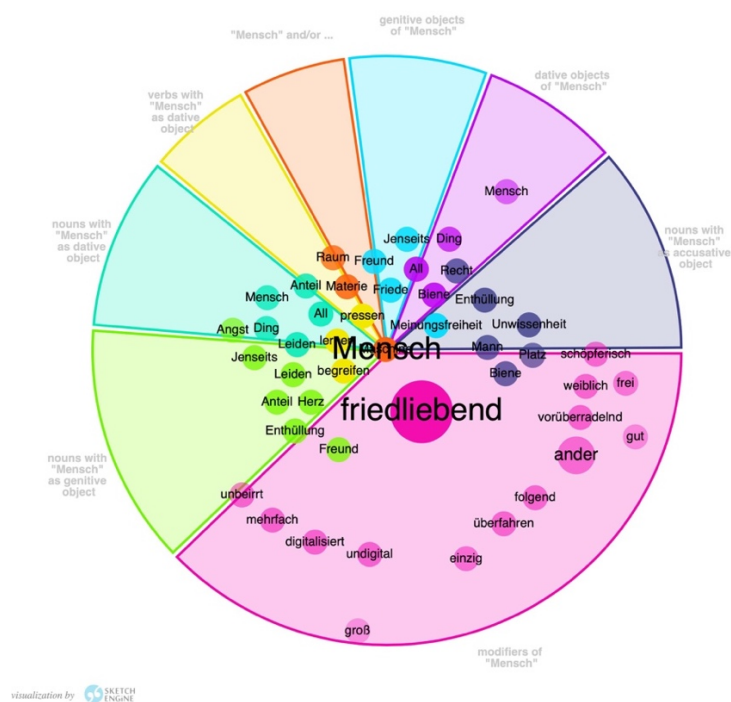
Figure 1
50 Most Frequent Nouns in the Corpus¹



noun (3,276 items | 6,741 total frequency)

Noun	Noun	Noun	Noun	Noun
1 Mensch	11 Tag	21 Freiheit	31 Sinn	41 Geist
2 Zeit	12 Gott	22 Kontrolle	32 Herz	42 Vater
3 Leben	13 Auge	23 Weg	33 Bild	43 Hund
4 Welt	14 Freund	24 Kopf	34 Junge	44 Staat
5 Kind	15 Ende	25 Blick	35 Ding	45 Wort
6 Krieg	16 Tod	26 Liebe	36 Mann	46 Seele
7 Frieden	17 Geschichte	27 Land	37 Macht	47 Natur
8 Friede	18 Haus	28 Körper	38 Licht	48 Kraft
9 Hand	19 Angst	29 Glück	39 Feind	49 Stimme
10 Apparat	20 Jahr	30 Gedicht	40 Gesicht	50 Volk

Figure 2
Collocations of the Word “Human”



¹ English translation of the most frequent nouns: 1 human, 2 time, 3 life, 4 world, 5 child, 6 war, 7 peace (Frieden), 8 peace (Friede), 9 hand, 10 apparatus, 11 day, 12 God, 13 eye, 14 friend, 15 end, 16 death, 17 history, 18 house, 19 fear, 20 year, 21 freedom, 22 control, 23 path, 24 head, 25 gaze, 26 love, 27 country, 28 body, 29 happiness, 30 poem, 31 meaning, 32 heart, 33 image, 34 boy, 35 thing, 36 man, 37 power, 38 light, 39 enemy, 40 face, 41 mind, 42 father, 43 dog, 44 state, 45 word, 46 soul, 47 nature, 48 strength, 49 voice, 50 people.

Figure 3
Collocations of the Word “Time”

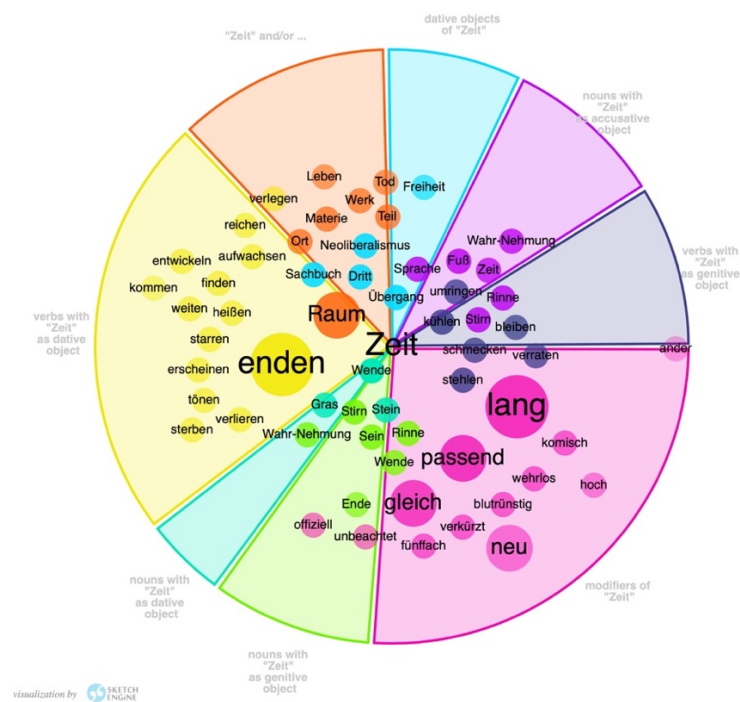
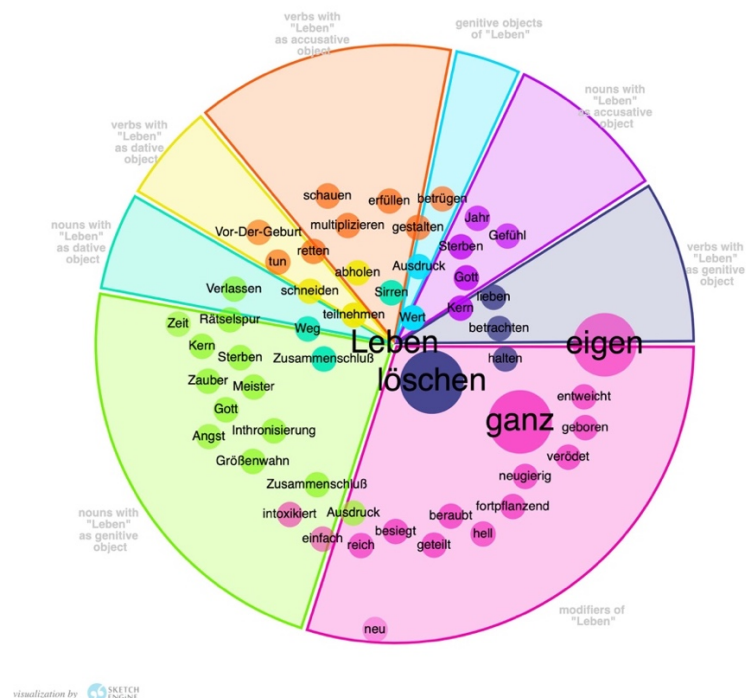


Figure 4
Collocations of the Word “Life”



The context surrounding the word *human* includes, on the one hand, positive attributes such as peace-loving, good, and free, as well as nouns like *friend* or *heart*. However, the *human* is also associated with many terms that point to human struggle and inner conflict – such as *suffering*, *fear*, *ignorance*, and *straining*. Humans are confronted with *space*, *matter*, and *objects* as well as with the *afterlife*, *machines*, and *digitalization*. This prototype of humanity is at the same time *different* from other humans; it moves between *ignorance* and *revelation*; it must *learn* and *understand* in order to ultimately remain *unwavering*. In connection with *time*, further negative perceptions follow—time is associated with terms such as *strange*, *defenseless*, *bloodthirsty*, *shortened*, *betrayed*, *enclosed*, etc. Yet it is also a time of *transition*, of *change*, of *neoliberalism*. Together with concepts such as *life*, *death*, *freedom*, and *end*, a philosophical dimension opens up, though again with a more negative connotation. This is also confirmed by a look at the collocations of the term *life* – life is *erased*, it *slips away*, it becomes *desolate*, one is *robbed of life*, and other expressions such as *cut*, *betray*, and *intoxicated* can correspond to a nihilistic and lamenting worldview. Humanity and its life are at the mercy of megalomania, fear, dying, and abandonment.

Figure 5

The 20 Most Frequent Multi-word Terms²



Term	
1	friedliebender Mensch
2	Einzelhaft als Knecht
3	Tod des Apparates
4	Mittel des Tötens
5	Diktatur der Macht
6	Ration Heldenmut
7	arabische Raubgesellschaft
8	manifestierte Angst
9	Knecht in Feigheit
10	Anmaßung zur Macht

The contrast and prevalence of negative connotations are also evident in the most frequent multi-word terms identified by the SketchEngine tool using the German Web 2023 (deTenTen23) reference corpus (see Figure 5). Although the term *peace-loving person* ranks first – from whom a *ration of heroism* is expected (position 6) – the other word combinations increasingly suggest that the individual is at the mercy of a power apparatus or the *dictatorship of power*. He is also repeatedly referred to as a *servant*. These recurring aspects of power are best examined from the perspective of critical discourse analysis.

² English translation of the most frequent multi-word terms: 1 peace-loving human, 2 solitary confinement as servant, 3 death of the apparatus, 4 means of killing, 5 dictatorship of power, 6 ration of heroism, 7 Arab predatory society, 8 manifested fear, 9 servant in cowardice, 10 presumption to power.

An Approach From the Perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis

In the next section, we will examine the analyzed corpus in greater detail and look at the contexts in which the most frequent words and keywords appear. In doing so, we will combine quantitative corpus analysis with critical discourse analysis. As Kutter (2018, p. 177) notes, quantitative corpus analysis takes a conceptually selective approach, emphasizes the individual word as the carrier of meaning, and views context more as a statistically defined co-text. In the next step, we will therefore expand on the purely statistical aspect by incorporating a more comprehensive contextual analysis. Let's take a look, for example, at the first most frequent multi-word term that appears in the poem *Kennst du Frieden?* (English: Do You Know Peace?) by Barbara Hindenes (see Figure 6):

Figure 6

Poem "Do You Know Peace?" by Barbara Hindenes

*Ist Friede, wenn friedliebende Menschen in Konflikte hineingezogen werden?
Ist Friede, wenn friedliebende Menschen ihrer Meinungsfreiheit,
ihrer Menschen- und Bürgerrechte und ihrer Privatsphäre beraubt werden?
Ist Friede, wenn friedliebende Menschen die Unwissenheit, die
Täuschungsmanöver und die Gewalt von Mächtigen offenlegen und
deshalb zum Schweigen gebracht werden?
Ist wirklich Friede, wenn friedliebende Menschen zu Feinden
deklariert und zu Ausgestoßenen gemacht werden?
Ist Friede, wenn friedliebende Menschen getötet werden?* (Hindenes 2022)

Is it peace when peace-loving people are drawn into conflicts?
Is it peace when peace-loving people are deprived of their freedom of speech,
their human and civil rights, and their privacy?
Is it peace when peace-loving people expose the ignorance,
deception, and violence of those in power and
are silenced as a result?
Is it truly peace when peace-loving people are declared enemies
and made into outcasts?
Is it peace when peace-loving people are killed? (translation)

Note. English translation by the author.

Central to these rhetorical questions is the dialogic structure initiated by the poem's title between the lyrical subject and an addressed "you." Both belong to the group of peace-loving people who stand in opposition to the violence of the powerful. The peace-loving people are drawn into conflicts, deprived of their freedom of speech and their rights, silenced, ostracized, and even killed. This confrontation contradicts the idea of peace and gives rise to a polarization and dichotomization typical of populist discourse. It is underpinned by further binary oppositions; an epistemic hierarchy emerges between "us" and "them," whereby both groups are morally charged (as good or evil), and the discourse employs a strategy of inclusion and exclusion. The contribution of critical discourse analysis lies, in particular, in highlighting the linguistic and discursive nature of social power relations (Forchtner & Wodak, 2018, p. 136). From the perspective of the communicative level, peace-loving people are drawn into conflicts, deprived of their freedom of expression and their rights, silenced, ostracized, and even killed. The subject's bias toward portraying themselves in a positive light and others in a negative light is one of the general strategies of manipulative discourse (van Dijk 2018, p. 227). The

addressed subject is also positioned as an awakened and knowledgeable being and, as a resistant subject, acquires a new identity. We see something similar in the next poem:

Figure 7

Poem “Just Two Years Later” by Rudolph Bauer

<i>und wohin ist der mensch verschollen</i>	and where has the human being disappeared to?
<i>wer hatte ihn zum knecht gemacht</i>	who made him a servant?
<i>zum knecht der obrigkeit</i>	a servant of authority
<i>zum folterknecht sodann</i>	then a servant of torture
<i>vom nekrophoben ängstlichen</i>	from a fearful necrophobe
<i>zum nekrophilen todesschwadronneur</i>	to a necrophilic squadronneur of death
<i>verlasst den kreislauf</i>	break free from the cycle
<i>rebelliert</i>	rebel
<i>zerreißt den totenschein (Bauer 2022)</i>	tear up the death certificate (Bauer 2022)

Note. English translation by the author.

The subject is to be roused from his passivity; once awakened, he is no longer the sleeper and the obedient one, but rather offers resistance that can even overcome death. The cited examples, as well as the keywords and collocations of the most frequent words, show that affect-related terms such as fear, death, control, and freedom are often employed; these are further reinforced through multiple repetitions, which is linked to the strategy of emotionalization and affect regulation.

The central terms can sometimes be reinterpreted and recoded (reframing); as a rule, positive or neutral expressions are often shifted into negative ones (e.g., banks become churches, solidarity becomes coercion, or science becomes religion), but re-semanticization can also occur in the opposite direction, as the following poem by Rudolph Bauer demonstrates (see Figure 8).

The poem “Venceremos—Victory,” which references the Spanish protest song “Venceremos,” takes up the central idea of “We will prevail.” However, it reinterprets the meaning of the concept of victory. From a linguistic and philosophical perspective, this can be understood as the idea that every word simultaneously resonates with its own differentiability and oppositions to other words. In this case, the meaning of the word “victory” depends on its opposites, such as defeat, enemy, death, destruction, and skeleton. The lyrical collective subject “we,” however, reflects on these resonating meanings, seeks to free itself from uniform thinking, and associates the concept of victory with blossoming, tulips, gentian flowers, happiness, friendship, humanity, God, and the future. The line of thought moves from comparisons with nature toward abstraction. “We” becomes the mouthpiece of God and the future. In this way, a new reality is constructed. This is made explicit by the reflection that reality can be discursively created and also discursively recreated, which means that in this attempt, the official discourse can be delegitimized. In the course of this, new metaphors are also created as ideological tools. These approaches can be interpreted as typical of populist and conspiracy-theoretic linguistic strategies.

Figure 8*Poem “Venceremos Victories” by Rudolph Bauer*

wenn wir erklären
wir werden siegen
sprechen wir nicht
von militärischen siegen
und den niederlagen
unserer feinde

unsere siege blühen
auf wie holländische
tulpen wie blauer
enzian ohne gewalt
ohne leichenskelett
und zerstörung

dass ein wort wie sieg
die niederlagen anderer
bedeutet zeigt | wie
schwarz das denken noch
in uniformen steckt
gehorsam und befehl

unsere siege sind
waffenlos gewaltfrei
und himmlisch
beseitigt durch sie
werden die sorgen
der armen der welt

sagen wir freude
statt siege | sagen wir
freundschaft und
glück | liegen wir uns
in den armen | lasst
menschheit uns sein

wenn wir von siegen
sprechen spricht
aus uns ein gott
spricht zukunft
leben aus uns | kein
feindbild kein tod (Bauer 2022)

When we declare
that we will triumph,
we are not speaking
of military victories
or the defeats
of our enemies

Our triumphs bloom
like Dutch
tulips, like blue
gentian—without violence,
without corpses,
and without destruction

that a word like “victory”
means the defeats of others
shows | how
deeply entrenched such thinking still|
in uniforms
obedience and command

our victories are
unarmed, nonviolent
and heavenly
through them
the sorrows
of the world’s poor

let us say joy
instead of victories | let us say
friendship and
happiness | let us lie
in each other’s arms |let us
be humanity

when we speak of victories
a god speaks
from within us
speaks of the future
of life from within us | no
enemy image, no death (translation)

Note. English translation by the author.

In general, the analyzed texts can be described as highly reflexive, reflecting a keen sensitivity to social discourses. This can also be confirmed by looking at the most frequently occurring verbs in the corpus (see Figure 9). Among the 50 most frequent verbs are expressions such as *say, see, hear, think, know, believe, speak, write, mean, recognize, name, tell, understand, learn, and comprehend*, all of which are associated with cognitive abilities. Reality and discourse are not merely reflected upon and perceived; rather, they are viewed with the aim of interpreting them in accordance with one’s own worldview, as well as changing and reinterpreting them.

Figure 9
50 Most Frequent Verbs in the Corpus



verb (1,250 items | 5,088 total frequency)

Verb	Verb	Verb	Verb	Verb
1 sein	11 lassen	21 bleiben	31 tun	41 erzählen
2 werden	12 sollen	22 nehmen	32 leben	42 fallen
3 haben	13 machen	23 sprechen	33 sterben	43 verstehen
4 können	14 stehen	24 finden	34 brauchen	44 lernen
5 geben	15 hören	25 liegen	35 schreiben	45 verlieren
6 kommen	16 denken	26 bringen	36 tanzen	46 zeigen
7 sagen	17 wissen	27 mögen	37 meinen	47 setzen
8 sehen	18 wollen	28 stellen	38 suchen	48 schaffen
9 gehen	19 glauben	29 dürfen	39 erkennen	49 begreifen
10 müssen	20 halten	30 ziehen	40 nennen	50 tragen

In addition to attempting to critique and shift prevailing discourses, new discourses of their own are also created, presenting alternative scenarios and establishing hypothetical causalities. This occurs not only in the actual poetic texts of the *Poetry Corner*, but also in the paratext, which interprets and contextualizes the presented and published texts, as in this example:

Figure 10
Text “From Head to Heel” by Daniel Sandmann

Ich denke, es gibt, das ganze Corona-Geschehen betreffend, nicht nur einen Hauptfaktor oder ein Hauptziel. Das denkbare ‚Ziel‘ eines absichtlichen Menschheitsreduktionsprogramms könnte ebenso eine sogenannte Nebenwirkung, ein Kollateralschaden sein, der ebenso leicht und auch gern hingenommen wird, da er sich mit andern Zielen und Motiven verschränkt, wie wir es sehen — alle Vorsichtsmaßnahmen fehlen, alle Aufklärungsversuche bleiben aus: Dann wäre es schlicht der Sieg des Faschismus als Grundhaltung, was ja eh nicht fern liegt. Ein ebenso denkbare ‚Ziel‘ ist die absolut totale Profit-Schürfung anlässlich dieser außergewöhnlichen Gelegenheit, wenn die gesamte — überlebende — Weltbevölkerung immer wieder vielfach geimpft und geboostet werden kann und immer neue ‚Mutanten‘ aus den Ärmeln geschüttelt werden. (Sandmann 2021b)

I think that, when it comes to the whole Coronavirus situation, there isn't just one main factor or one main goal. The conceivable “goal” of a deliberate program to reduce the human population could just as easily be a so-called side effect, collateral damage, which is just as readily and willingly accepted because it intertwines with other goals and motives, as we see— all precautions are lacking, all attempts at clarification are absent: Then it would simply be the triumph of fascism as a fundamental attitude, which is not far-fetched anyway. An equally conceivable ‘goal’ is the absolute, total pursuit of profit on the occasion of this extraordinary opportunity, when the entire—surviving—world population can be repeatedly vaccinated and boosted many times over, and ever-new ‘variants’ are pulled out of thin air. (translation)

Note. English translation by the author.

The introductory text to Poetry Corner IV by Daniel Sandmann outlines a nightmare scenario involving a program to eliminate humanity. At the same time, it draws causal links to the greed and profit-seeking of the pharmaceutical industry and to the notion that vaccinated people will turn into mutants. These words correspond to common patterns of conspiracy theory discourse;

they suggest hidden agendas of the elites and an orchestrated reality and construct hypothetical causes and effects.

The content of the published poems also belongs to this conspiracy discourse. For example, texts by Lisa Danilova (see Figure 11) and Ian Folko Ressisch (see Figure 12) also address medical discourse and the topic of vaccination.

Figure 11

Poem “Disease” by Lisa Danilova

*Sagt mir des Doktors tiefe Stimme
Es ist nicht das, wofür du's hältst
Sieh zu! Dich täuschen deine Sinne
Und schützen tue ich dich vor deiner selbst*

[...]

*Glück gibt es nur noch aus der Spritze.
An frischer Luft gibt's nur noch Atemnot.
Der Lebenssinn verbrennt in Fieberhitze.
Man lebt nicht. Man ist fast schon tot.*

(Danilova 2021)

The doctor's deep voice tells me
It's not what you think it is
Take care! Your senses are deceiving you
And I'm protecting you from yourself

[...]

Happiness now comes only from the syringe.
Fresh air brings only shortness of breath.
The meaning of life burns in feverish heat.
You don't live. You're almost dead.

(translation)

Note. English translation by the author.

Figure 12

Poem “Vaccination is Love” by Ian Folko Ressisch

*Mehr Kontrolle und impfen! Impfen ist Liebe! Die Leine mal lockern
und mal wieder straffen.*

*Sind wir gehorsam und fressen wir den rauen Knochen, den sie uns
mit gewaschenen Händen hinhalten — so sagen sie — dann dürfen
wir wieder leben!*

*Und ich glaube daran, dass man einen sicheren, ganz neuen
Impfstoff in mehr als fünffach verkürzter Zeit entwickeln kann.
Ich glaube, dass er hilft.*

[...]

*Es fühlt sich gut an, in den nächsten Lockdown einzutauchen und
meinen Kindern zu erklären, dass ich das Richtige mache, wenn ich
sie einsperre!*

*Ich bin jetzt konsequent naiv — und es fühlt sich einfach alles so
alternativlos richtig an! (Ressisch 2021)*

More control and vaccinations! Vaccination is love! Loosen the leash
and then tighten it again.

If we're obedient and gulp down the raw bone they
hold out to us with washed hands—so they say—then we'll be allowed
to live again!

And I believe that a safe, brand-new
vaccine can be developed in less than a fifth of the usual time.
I believe it helps.

[...]

It feels good to dive into the next lockdown and
explain to my children that I'm doing the right thing when I
lock them up!

I'm being consistently naive now—and it all just feels so
unquestionably right! (translation)

Note. English translation by the author.

Both attempt to delegitimize or ridicule the expert discourse. The authorities, expressed for example through the doctor's voice, are called into question; the lyrical subject is exposed to a sense of deception, though he believes he can see through it. Faced with this discourse, the subject is either helplessly at the mercy of the authorities and feels robbed of life, or it adopts the strategy of seemingly submitting to the pressure of the discourse in order to defeat it through irony and pretended naivety. In this inversion of thinking lies the subject's own strength and superiority.

The specific, conspiracy-based discourse of the analyzed texts is also characterized by interdiscursivity. Specifically, there is an intertwining of political, scientific, and religious discourse with everyday discourse. Furthermore, these layers of discourse are linked to poetic and aesthetic dialogue. For this reason, it seems appropriate to examine the texts from the perspective of literary studies and literary criticism as well.

An Approach From the Perspective of Literary Studies

It would be insufficient to examine this specific corpus, which consists of poetic texts, only from the perspective of linguistics and discourse analysis. Most of the poems analyzed belong to the genre of political poetry and can thus be situated within a particular literary tradition. We find political content as early as the Middle Ages (e.g., in the works of Walter von der Vogelweide), during the Reformation, in portrayals of the Thirty Years' War (e.g., Gryphus), in the struggle for freedom during the period of the Enlightenment (e.g., Schubart, Schiller), in the Vormärz period or during the Weimar Republic, as well as in postwar literature (e.g., the late 1960s). In this context, we speak not only of political literature but also of socially engaged literature. The concept of socially engaged literature was defined on a theoretical level by figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Walter Benjamin, and writers across various literary periods have discussed the role of literature as an instrument for social change within the framework of their poetologies.

The concept of the "Poetry Corner," which appears as a special section of the literary editorial section of the magazine *Rubikon* and later *Manova*, can be described directly as a form of political engagement. The first "Poetry Corner" opens with the following words:

Figure 13

Text "Over Glowing Shards" by Daniel Sandmann

Wer politische Kritik übt, sich dabei aber der Sprachmuster bedient, die vom Gegner geprägt wurden, der tanzt noch immer nach deren Melodie. Wir müssen nicht nur die Strukturen der Macht überwinden, sondern auch ihr Bewusstsein, das sich in der Ausdrucksweise manifestiert. Der erste Schritt, um einer Gesellschaft den Spiegel vorzuhalten, ist somit der Schritt aus der Sprache heraus, die sie spricht. Nur aus diesem Abstand lässt sich verstehen, wie eine Gesellschaft funktioniert, wie die Machtkanäle verlaufen. (Sandmann 2021a)

Those who engage in political criticism but use the same language patterns shaped by their opponents are still dancing to their tune. We must overcome not only the structures of power, but also the mindset that manifests itself in language. The first step in holding up a mirror to society is therefore to step outside the language it speaks. Only from this distance can we understand how a society functions and how the channels of power operate. (translation)

Note. English translation by the author.

Poetic language is understood as a kind of counter-language and counter-discourse, which corresponds to Foucault's original conception of literary discourse. This perspective runs like a thread through the entire "Poetry Corner" section. Poetry is understood as a means to autonomy and human dignity, as a kind of salvation from the threatening future:

Figure 14

Text "*The Signs Point to a Storm*" by Daniel Sandmann

[...] gerade deshalb ist Poesie ein Mittel, Autonomie zu wahren. Würde. Raum für Machtkritik. Poetisches Schreiben als letzte Manifestation des Menschen, wie wir ihn gekannt haben und den zu opfern schwerfällt, angesichts dessen, was an seine Stelle zu treten droht ... (Sandmann 2021b)

[...] precisely for this reason, poetry is a means of preserving autonomy. Dignity. A space for critiquing power. Poetic writing as the final manifestation of humanity as we have known it—and one that is difficult to sacrifice, given what threatens to take its place ... (translation)

Note. English translation by the author.

The central topic is language, which is viewed as a site of power and resistance. In this regard, poetry serves as a counter-space, a medium of insight, and a specific form of resistance. At the same time, it helps to expose reality as manipulated, controlled, and media generated.

The analyzed texts are characterized by an extreme heterogeneity of poetic registers and an uneven artistic level. The style ranges from catchphrases and agitation with short verses, simple syntax, and frequent repetitions, through satirical, parodic imitations of classical formulas (e.g., parodies of the national anthem or the Lord's Prayer), to an independent, vividly imaginative language and metaphorically rich poetry. The language is often paratactic, repetitive, and mantra-like. Everyday language is mixed with bureaucratic language, technical terminology, and natural vocabulary; hyperbole, irony, and parody are also strongly represented.

The texts analyzed construct a very specific lyrical subject. The "I" in Hindenes's text "Do You Know Peace" (see Figure 6), for example, is able to see the hidden truth and identify the contradiction between the official conception of peace and its supposedly real meaning. In Bauer's text "Just two years later" (see Figure 7) we witness a transformation of the subject from a passive victim to an opponent of the system and a fighter. The lyrical "I" often has privileged access to the truth and is correspondingly enlightened. This corresponds to the epistemic self-awareness typical of conspiracy narratives, which establishes the distinction between a knowledgeable and enlightened minority and the deceived majority. Symbolically, a kind of initiation and pseudo-religious revelation is constructed. The symbolism of awakening and revelation is among the oldest cultural archetypes. In the analyzed texts, it takes on a political function. Within this framework, knowledge and ignorance, waking and sleeping, freedom and subjugation, as well as truth and falsehood, are symbolically juxtaposed and imbued with ideological significance.

The metaphors and symbols used—such as screen, apparatus, machine, and algorithm—belong to the realm of technology and media. Here, the human being is understood as a controlled system and reality as a media construct. The next realm is represented by bodily metaphors (using terms such as skull, immune system, and cells). In poetic depictions, the human body becomes a site of power intervention; it is economized as a means of production or a bioreactor.

Nature is also closely linked to biopolitical imagery. Following the literary tradition, nature is portrayed in opposition to technology. The natural realm is represented by plants, earth, and roots, while the realm of technology is represented by fiber optics, microplastics, or mRNA. In this juxtaposition, technology is associated with alienation and invasion, whereas nature is associated with authenticity and healing. Finally, it is the use of disaster imagery—with terms like “inferno,” “ruins,” “flames,” “war,” and so on—that has a powerful emotional impact and leads to over-dramatization. Dystopian visions are frequently the subject of these depictions. However, these apocalyptic visions are also countered by religious symbolism. The work features an eschatological imagery that draws on concepts of death, doom, the end of time, destruction, but also salvation and the future. Contrary to what one might expect, religion does not offer a way out of the dystopia. Rather, the focus is on a critique of power. The aspects being criticized are sacralized and exposed as a false substitute religion (e.g., when banks are depicted as churches, or when there is talk of a “holy market”). Following the conspiracy-theory rhetoric, the analyzed poems portray various alternative realities, hypothetical scenarios, dreamlike and surreal scenes, or alternative historical timelines. Richardson (2012, p. 177) describes this type of narrative as antimimetic. The goal of antimimetic narratives is to challenge official accounts and present us with alternative worldviews, thereby revealing the unreality of conventional notions of order. In this way, hidden truths and concealed connections are revealed and brought to light.

Conclusion

Our partial analyses reveal a discourse formation with a strongly ideological structure, characterized by polarization and dichotomization, discursive subjectification, emotionalization and affect steering, counterfactual narratives, metaphorization, and reframing, among other features. The logic of populist discourse – whose central features include anti-elitism, moral dichotomies, and the homogenization of the people – is also encoded poetically and aesthetically. Some of the texts resemble political rhetoric, while others are characterized by greater poetic independence and refinement. The language is characterized by the contradiction between poetic condensation and imagery on the one hand, and the discursive adoption of political language on the other. It is evident that the analyzed texts can be described as engaged poetry; they demonstrate an explicit opposition to the state, the media, or science. They employ an appellative structure, draw upon the friend-foe dichotomy, and evoke a moral urgency. In this hybrid form between literature and political discourse, poetry functions, in a certain sense, as an autonomous and specific tool for shaping opinion and persuasion.

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