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Identification and Aesthetic Transgression in Populism: Toward a Queer Theory of Sublimation

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Abstract. This article rethinks the notion of identification in populism by linking psychoanalysis, aesthetics and queer theory. Against the widespread view that identification necessarily entails blindness or submission to authority, it proposes an emancipatory mode grounded in transgression, vulnerability, and openness to alterity. Conceiving populism as aesthetic transgression – a disruption of the boundaries of visibility – it revisits Freud and Lacan’s reflections on mass psychology and sublimation, while drawing on Arendt’s idea of aesthetic judgment and queer theory’s attention to indeterminacy and openness. Without denying the persistence of reactionary identifications that idealize authority, the article argues that sublimation, unlike idealization, sustains democratic plurality by keeping collective identifications open and incomplete. In this perspective, certain forms of populist identification may assume a queer or sublimatory dimension, fostering receptivity to difference and ethical decentering rather than closure – thus illuminating how aesthetic experience can underwrite more radically democratic relations to others.

Keywords. Psychoanalysis, mimetic theory, mimetic desire transgender, theory of imaginary.

For over a century, the notion of identification has been received in politics with suspicion. In Sigmund Freud, it emerges within the psychology of

the masses: a terrain of blind attachments, obedience to the leader, and the loss of critical sense. Much of the scholarship on populism has inherited this lens: to identify is, almost invariably, to dissolve into the collective and renounce democracy. Even in Ernesto Laclau – who claims the legitimacy of populism – identification is often read instrumentally, as a mere device for mass mobilization that nonetheless entails the abdication of critical spirit.

This article proposes a shift. Building on an aesthetic theory of populism developed within the field of critical populism studies, I seek to explore how its dialogue with psychoanalysis and queer theory can illuminate the possibility of an emancipatory form of identification – radically democratic in nature, not grounded in mastery or closure but in transgression, vulnerability, and openness to alterity. The argument unfolds in two movements. Part I introduces the aesthetic theory of populism and revisits, through the lens of psychoanalysis, the darker readings of mass identification, marked by phallic fantasies, leader sacralization, and the impoverishment of democratic plurality. Part II opens a different path: I examine the psychoanalytic notion of sublimation as a way to conceptualize radically democratic forms of identification. I argue that sublimation creates space for a debate on aesthetic judgement and for experiences of transgression that, inspired by subaltern studies and queer studies, displace us and incite an ethics of radical democracy.

1. *Identification and its specters*

1.1 *Bridging leaders and masses*

Over the last decade, I have been working in two critical fields: *critical populism studies* and *critical fantasy studies*. The first approaches populism not as a pathology to be dismissed or a model to be celebrated, but as a process of constructing political subjects. The second is concerned with the psychoanalytical dynamics of politics. Although I often conceive of them as intertwined, the reflections I develop in one of these fields are not always explicitly connected to the other. Recently, for example, I have been developing an aesthetic theory of populism – a conception of populism as aesthetic transgression. In this theme, psychoanalysis has been present in the background, informing my understanding of transgression and the dynamics of visibility that I explore later in this work, even if it has so far remained implicit in my publications. Here, by turning to the question of identification, I wish to make this affiliation explicit.

The central objective of my proposal – to conceive populism as aesthetic transgression – is to bridge a gap between two approaches that have long circulated in critical populism studies as fellow travelers but whose articulation remains insufficiently clarified: the discursive and the performative. The first, most prominently developed

by Laclau ([2005]: ix), understands that «the people» is not a pre-given sociological entity but a symbolic construction that emerges through its opposition to «the elites», and institutes new collective identities. The second, exemplified by Théo Aiolfi's work ([2022]: 6; [2025]: 138) and his notion of a «transgressive style», highlights the disruptive performances associated with populist leadership.

My proposal is to demonstrate how these two approaches can be integrated in a conceptually rigorous way. I do so by extending the notion of «transgression» beyond the performative gestures of leaders and relocating it within the field of aesthetics. In this perspective, populism is not confined to a matter of style but enacts an aesthetic transgression in Jacques Rancière's ([2000]: 12) sense of aesthetics as the *partage du sensible*. Aesthetics here is not an ornament or superficial veneer, but the very ground of politics itself. Rancière's account situates politics within what one could call a symbolic order, ruled by a grammar of visibility and sayability that defines what can be perceived, named, and thought. It is in this sense that politics is fundamentally aesthetic: politics is understood as a question of appearances – of what can and cannot be seen, of what is rendered audible or consigned to silence.

Populism is aesthetically transgressive because it enacts what Rancière ([2003]: 63) calls a disruption in the partition of the sensible. It shifts the boundary between the visible and the invisible in politics – a gesture that cuts across its emancipatory and reactionary forms alike. It does so in two complementary ways. First, by invoking «the people», it brings into view what Rancière ([1995]: 31) called the «part of no-part» – those whom Antonio Gramsci ([1934]: Q25 §1, 4) named the subalterns, whom Georges Bataille ([1933a]: 142) described as the heterogeneous, and whom Hannah Arendt ([1971]: 19, 29; [1958]: 115, 118, 201) referred to as worldless. To use Benjamin Arditi's ([2019]: 57) expression, the «exodus from invisibility» enacted by populism is disruptive, for the very appearance of such excluded, uncounted and even «object» groups reconfigures the coordinates through which politics operates (Butler [1990]: 23).

However, populist discourse enacts aesthetic transgression not only by invoking «the people» but also, as Aiolfi has rightly noted in our joint work, by speaking of «the elites» (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi [2025a]: 8). Politics is always a matter of visibility and invisibility, organized through mechanisms of silencing and domination. These mechanisms are themselves aesthetic, since they operate most effectively when they remain invisible and insidious. Exposing these dynamics by naming «the elites», populism makes their implicit grammar perceptible. In this sense, populism presents itself as a counter-hegemonic force: it not only ruptures established political styles and hegemonic mechanisms of silencing, but reconfigures the very boundaries of the sensible, reinscribing on the political stage subjects and conflicts that had been invisible and excluded.

When populism is conceived as aesthetic transgression that exposes and reconfigures what has been rendered invisible, a psychoanalytic affiliation be-

comes unavoidable. This is, first of all, because of the notion of the «real», situated at the margins of the symbolic order. Introduced early in Jacques Lacan's work and reformulated multiple times, the concept has served to describe psychotic ruptures, the structural lack that traverses the subject, traumatic breaks, the force of the drive, and even the material resistance of the signifier – its trace, its sound waves in themselves deprived of meaning yet affecting the body (Zicman de Barros [2026]: 17). Beneath this apparent multiplicity, however, a constant remains: the «real» designates an experience that eludes symbolic capture, something discourse cannot assimilate, exposing the fissures in the order that strives to impose signification. In political terms, it corresponds to what remains invisible or unspeakable within the existing order – the excluded elements that resist representation yet insist on returning. To think of populism as aesthetic transgression is, therefore, to situate it in those moments when the «real» erupts into and transforms the symbolic order, placing it under strain – and in shock.

From the entry of the invisible into the political scene, a second way in which psychoanalysis informs the theory of populism becomes clear: the centrality of desire. Contrary to Laclau's proposal, what underlies the populist experience are not only «demands» but also desire – understood as the desire for belonging and recognition (Zicman de Barros [2020]: 514). As Lacan ([1960a]: 802, 813; [1963]: 76-77) reminds us, desire is always the desire of the other: we desire to be desired. This movement is embodied above all in the gaze – we seek to capture the gaze of the other, to be seen and recognized. Populism, by rendering the invisible visible, provides precisely this place of recognition, establishing an affective bond that exceeds the mere discursive articulation of demands (Zicman de Barros [2022a]: 73–74).

Finally – and now more explicitly entering the theme of this text, identification – psychoanalysis reappears as the bridge between stylistic and aesthetic transgression. From a psychoanalytic perspective, identification is a process of internalization through which the subject adopts an external ideal image of who they «should» be. The self, in this sense, is always an *alter ego*: constituted in relation to an image that remains irreducibly external (Lacan [1962]: 11). This process is never solitary, since such images are always mediated by the gaze of others (Lacan [1964]: 298).

Freud ([1921]: 105-7) had already traced identification back to its earliest moments in the libidinal bond between the child and its caregivers, later expanding it to more complex forms of adult identification, culminating in mass psychology. There is an extensive literature on the notion of the mass, both in political sociology and in psychoanalysis (see also Marx [1852]: 149). In most of these approaches, the mass refers to a situation in which symbolic references are lacking – what Lacan ([1980]: 11) once compared to a pile of grains of sand: elements that can be counted one by one but that lack the cohesion provided by a shared symbol. Identification, in this sense, is the process through which a dispersed and atomized crowd becomes symbolically organized, acquiring the consistency of what Freud called mass formations.

In these formations, Freud ([1921]: 112-116) distinguishes two axes of identification. The vertical axis designates the collective investment with a leader or guiding idea. For sure, the identification with a leader does not mean, however, that subjects wish to *be* the leader – as Freud ([1921]: 134-135) himself notes, such a will would often be absurd – but rather that they internalize a trait or quality of the leader as a model for what they ideally ought to become. Through this process, they seek to see themselves, and to be seen by others, as part of the ideal image that the leader embodies: «the people», or whichever collective ideal is at stake. The horizontal axis, by contrast, links subjects to one another through their shared attachment to that leader or idea. Laclau ([2005]: 56) reworks this dynamic, proposing that a common fascination with a signifier is what enables the formation of communal bonds within the mass.

Yet a point not extensively debated by Freud is that identification processes are fostered by moments of symbolic crisis – what Laclau ([1990]: 29) would call dislocation. Freud's focus was largely on the formation of masses through libidinal bonds, paying less attention to the prior state of atomization that renders such formations possible. And this is precisely what characterizes the contemporary condition. Processes of massification, marked by fragmentation and dispossession, erode social and symbolic bonds. Massification thus designates the dissolution of shared references, producing subjects deprived of stable attachments and increasingly available for new ones (see also Laclau [1960]: 24-25). Among the various forms this disaggregation takes today, a particularly salient one today is that of the precarious (Zicman de Barros [2024a]: 11–12). Precarization is not only an economic process but also a symbolic one: it strips workers of the instruments of political action and identification, relegating them to the margins (see also Butler [2019]: 15, 24-26).

It is within this availability that the force of populism today can be partly understood. Vast contingents become especially receptive to the transgressions of charismatic leaders who promise a breakthrough from invisibility. Although populism does not always depend on charismatic leaders – one need only recall the wave of horizontal «indignation» movements that swept across the world in recent decades, such as the French Yellow Vests (Zicman de Barros [2026]: 2) – the link between the transgressive style of populist leadership and the desire for recognition animating marginalized groups is evident.

The bond between the masses and the leader arises because the leader comes to embody a fantasmatic promise of recognition – a way to address the anguish or dislocation constitutive of the subject. By serving as a path to visibility – an emergence from the shadows of social irrelevance into presence and worth within the collective – this promise also entails a fantasy of wholeness, akin to what Freud ([1929]: 65-66) debated as an «oceanic feeling»: a fleeting sense of boundless unity and belonging. In psychoanalytic terms, this experience can be understood as a form of *jouissance* – an excessive enjoyment that fuses pleasure and pain, the dissolution of limits and the fantasy of plenitude.

From this perspective, the performative approach to populism brings into view the psychoanalytic dynamics that sustain identification with the charismatic leader – above all the promise of *enjoyment-in-transgression* (Glynos [2014]: 181). By breaking with decorum and overstepping established boundaries, the leader activates fantasies of enjoyment, which are then coupled with the production of scapegoats: groups blamed for collective suffering, the so-called «thieves of enjoyment» in psychoanalytic political theory – figures imagined as parasites who revel at our expense (Žižek [1993]: 202). Here the fantasmatic dimension of populism becomes apparent: the lure of what psychoanalysis terms an illusory phallic enjoyment – not merely a sense of privilege or completeness, but the fantasy of raw, ostentatious virility, of power exercised without limits, of an obscene bravado that parades itself in defiance of law, decorum, and constraint. It is this imagined omnipotence – excessive, shameless, jubilantly transgressive – that sustains the libidinal and political bond between leaders and masses.

1.2 *Blinding leaders and masses*

However, if the notion of identification allows us to think of populism as aesthetic transgression, it also casts it in a darker light. It is no coincidence that Freud developed his theory of identification precisely in the context of reflecting on the psychology of the masses. Yet Freud ([1921]: 113) is deeply pessimistic about their irruption. Mass dynamics, for him, are grounded in idealization. Once captivated by a leader or an idea, and forming horizontal bonds around this shared ideal, the subject becomes blind and may be led «to the pitch of crime». Within this horizon, there is no space to conceive forms of democratic identification or to imagine democratic masses. From such a perspective, populism can hardly be thought of in emancipatory terms.

This Freudian intuition is not isolated. A number of thinkers have taken similar paths, portraying the entry of certain invisible groups into politics as essentially undemocratic. In Karl Marx ([1847]: 211; [1852]: 149), the masses are associated with Bonapartism – a classic framework for 20th-century analyses of populism – and with the figure of the lumpen, an expression of the worldless whom Arendt ([1951]: 107-108) would later refer to as the «mob». These reactionary groups reproduce themselves in the shadows, and their sudden irruption into the public space acquires a disturbing character. There is, to be sure, an element of transgression when they emerge into what Arendt ([1958]: 199) calls the «space of appearances». Yet this is a reactionary transgression, one that reinforces rather than subverts social hierarchies.

Gramsci and Bataille also note the irruption of the radically excluded with a mixture of fascination and suspicion. Gramsci ([1930]: Q3 §48) acknowledges their disruptive potential but warns that, due to their disorganization, subaltern groups tend to reproduce reactionary common sense and lend support to tyrannical coups. Bataille ([1933b]: 161), in turn, associates the heterogeneous – his

term for the dregs of society, the «accursed part» whose eruption unsettles the social order – with fascism, underlining the risk that a force appearing counter-hegemonic may ultimately reaffirm dynamics of domination and silencing – in a transgression that, in the end, betrays itself.

Even Laclau, often regarded as a defender of populism, struggles to articulate a genuinely emancipatory account of it. While he claimed to defend radical democracy – understood here, as I will explain later, in ethical terms – his focus fell more on populism's instrumental logic. Radical democracy not only affirms the radical contingency of all naturalized, hegemonic social practices – the fact that things could always be otherwise – but also cultivates an awareness of this contingency. Laclau ([2000]: 85) himself argued that a radical democratic society is one that constantly interrogates its own certainties in the name of inclusion. Yet this reflective dimension is not consistently present in his theory of populism. There is, so to speak, an ethical deficit in his work on this matter (Zicman de Barros [2026]: 50). Populism appears above all as a powerful tool for mass mobilization placed at the service of leaders assumed to be guided by the best ideals. But such mobilization comes at the cost of critical reflection.

This is precisely where Slavoj Žižek ([2008]: 264) intervenes, suggesting that the politics of enjoyment inherent in populism may be «good in practice, but bad in theory». Populism does mobilize the masses, but it leaves no room for critical distance. Arditì ([2010]: 496) formulates a similar criticism, pointing to a cognitive asymmetry in Laclau: intellectuals know that fantasies of full enjoyment are unattainable, yet rather than sharing this awareness with the masses, they allow them to be carried away by illusions. The result is a process of identification close to what Laclau ([2004]: 180) himself described as «unconditional commitment» – an engagement that, in its extreme, resembles blindness and the pursuit of phallic enjoyment more than a horizon of emancipation.

2. Identification and its openings

2.1 Judging sublimation and populism

But is it possible to conceive of radical democratic modes of identification? I believe it is. And, paradoxical as it may seem in light of the previous section, it is in Laclau's own work that we find a decisive clue: the psychoanalytic notion of sublimation. While other authors have drawn on sublimation to think about democratic politics, Laclau was in fact a pioneer in linking it to populism. This is an association whose consequences for a radical democratic theory, and by extension for a theory of democratic identification, remain largely unexplored. I argue that sublimation, read through psychoanalysis, sheds new light on the reflections I have been developing on emancipatory populism, grounded in the idea of populism as aesthetic transgression. I

will briefly present these reflections and then show how sublimation has been implicit in them from the start. One advantage of approaching populism as aesthetic transgression, I suggest, is that it establishes a clearer connection with aesthetic judgement.

It was Arendt ([1961]: 222) who most explicitly brought the question of aesthetic judgement into the realm of politics. Her reflections on the subject are admittedly fragmentary, yet she insists that the structure of aesthetic judgement is analogous to that of political judgement. To say that something is beautiful or ugly, she argues, is not so different from saying that something is right or wrong. This perspective is particularly compelling for me, since I conceive of aesthetics and politics as inseparable. Arendt ([1970]: 72-73) further contends that such judgements are not reducible to mere expressions of individual taste – as if taste were immune to debate – but are grounded in a *sensus communis*, a capacity to feel in common that, in principle, belongs to everyone. At first glance, this *community sense*, as she calls it, might appear to her as something given. But in fact, Arendt insists, it must be cultivated – and, if neglected, can even atrophy. She calls this the exercise of an «enlarged mentality»: a mentality that, as the term itself suggests, can be stretched beyond the confines of one's own standpoint, opening the self to a moment of estrangement from its habitual perspective. As Arendt notes ([1970]: 71-72), community sense should not be confused with common sense. It is not a matter of received opinions or banal *clichés*, but of a shared capacity to take the perspectives of others into account – an «uncommon sense» that reflects what she calls plurality: the fact that people are different and interpret the world in different ways.

This notion of *community sense* resonates strongly with an ethics of radical democracy – where «ethics» is understood in a sense close to «aesthetics» (Zicman de Barros [2026]: 55). Ethics here means our mode of perceiving the world and allowing ourselves to be affected by it – not far from aesthetics, as the term is employed throughout this work, likewise concerned with perception and receptivity. Hence, radical democracy can be understood as a specific ethics: a disposition to look at the world with a certain strangeness, to foreground the contingency of our social practices, and thereby to question naturalized and hegemonic hierarchies (Glynos [2003]: 194). An open society, defined by its emancipatory character, is marked precisely by this ethics of decentering: it unsettles our certainties, forces us to see the world otherwise, and opens up the possibility of social transformation. At this point, the centrality of plurality in Arendt's ([1958]: 7-8; [1970]: 20) work becomes fully apparent: plurality exists only because there are no absolute guarantees – no final grounds of meaning, truth, or justice that could close the space of political debate. «Every truth is somehow coercive and tyrannical», writes Myriam Revault d'Allonnes ([1991]: 237), reflecting on Arendt ([1967]: 51). Politics is therefore not a matter of truth, but of perspectives: it is always possible to perceive the world from another

standpoint – in Lacanian terms, because there is an irreducible distance between the symbolic and the real.

This leads us to recognize something Arendt may never have stated explicitly: that there is indeed a condition of possibility for aesthetic judgement. What emerges from her reflections is the idea that specific aesthetic practices sustain community sense itself, enlarging the very enlarged mentality needed for judging. Although her writings on aesthetic criticism are rare and fragmentary, the moments in which Arendt ([1953]: 385; [1971]: 384-385) devoted herself more directly to the subject reveal her appreciation for works and experiences that establish a tension between the familiar and the strange – experiences that, as we shall see, point not to an ideal of beauty but to what might be called *the sublime*.

The notion of sublimation is among the most enigmatic in psychoanalysis. Freud is said to have written a metapsychological essay specifically devoted to the concept, but if such a manuscript ever existed, it has been lost or destroyed.¹ What remains are only scattered and fragmentary references – curiously, in a way similar to Arendt's writings on aesthetics. Yet, this very incompleteness already anticipates something essential to the sublimatory experience in psychoanalysis: the presence of lack, and above all its evocation through emptiness and incompleteness.

Here sublimation begins to prove especially fruitful for an aesthetic theory of populism. From the outset, Freud associated it with aesthetic practices. He described it in relation to the arts – though, of course, it is not confined to them, just as my conception of aesthetics also extends beyond that domain. Elsewhere, Freud ([1933]: 97) defines sublimation as a creative process aimed at producing a new object. Crucially, however, this is not just any object.

In Freudian metapsychology, sublimation – conceived as a destiny of the drive – is distinguished from idealization (Freud [1914]: 95). The artist who sublimates does not complete the work. It remains unfinished, or is deliberately presented as such (Freud [1910]: 66-67). Idealization, by contrast, fixes the object in a place of perfection and beauty, sealing it off from critique. Sublimation, instead, exposes the non-existence of such an ideal: it offers the object in its partiality, its incompleteness.

Lacan ([1960b]: 201) radicalizes this insight. He insists that the object of sublimation is not just any object, but an aesthetically singular one – an object that invokes its own incompleteness. He points to numerous works that mobilize a sense of incompleteness – invoking emptiness, evoking lack, and displacing the viewer – thereby generating what Freud ([1919]: 217) would call «uncanniness» – the unsettling feeling of something both familiar and strange.

More importantly, Lacan ([1964]: 186) argues that sublimation does not lie primarily in the concrete form of the object, but in a different relation to it. Here the bridge between sublimation and ethics becomes evident: ethics understood, once

1 On this point, see the editors' comments on Freud's ([1915]: 105-106) papers on metapsychology.

again, as a way of perceiving the world – close to the notion of aesthetics I have been developing, centered on receptivity and on how we allow ourselves to be affected. It is no coincidence that one of Lacan's most sustained discussions of sublimation takes place in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis. To sublimate, then, is to allow oneself to be affected otherwise: it is to embrace incompleteness.

2.2 *Queering sublimation and populism*

But is it possible to think of a political sublimation – and, more specifically, of a populist one? I have claimed that Claude Lefort would answer yes to the broader question (Zicman de Barros [2022b]: 229; [2024b]: 14). Deeply inspired by psychoanalysis, Lefort ([1982]: 15; [1983]: 27), seems to draw on the theme of sublimation to conceive democracy as the empty place of power. As for populism, following Laclau's intuition, I argue that the answer is also affirmative. Among aesthetic practices, sublimation is the one that most faithfully captures the transgressive spirit of populism.

What is at stake here is a discursive construction of «the people» with open borders: identification with the signifier *people* that does not present it as an idealized image, trapped in the narcissistic dynamics of desire, but rather as something incomplete, unrealized, and – at least to some extent – «unrealizable» (Marchart [2002]: 254). It is precisely this notion of the people that remains faithful to transgression.

To explain this fidelity to transgression in emancipatory and sublimatory populism, however, it is useful to draw on insights from subaltern and queer studies. Subaltern studies invite us to think of identities as fluid and relational, and to question claims of universalism on behalf of the invisible (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi [2025b]: 1409). Queer studies, in turn, emphasize deviation, disidentification, and the politics of vulnerability (Butler [1990]: 176). As I have suggested, it is no coincidence that *transgression* begins with the prefix *trans* – a movement across boundaries that renders visible what heteronormative and hegemonic orders exclude (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi [2025a]: 12–13). Queer aesthetics foregrounds practices that refuse coherence and completeness, exposing the fragility of social norms and the instability of the subject. In doing so, it questions barriers and unsettles rigid boundaries – those characteristic of an *aesthetics of conflict*, which draws a hard line between «us» and «them» and portrays «them» as the thieves of enjoyment – and instead cultivates an openness to what does not «fit», what Oliver Marchart ([2019]: 23) calls *conflicting aesthetic*.

This space of non-fitting echoes the aesthetic emptiness discussed earlier in Lacan: not an absence to be filled, but rather a disquieting void that unsettles the subject's search for completeness. I argue that, by embracing incompleteness, these aesthetic practices sustain sublimation.² This aligns with Laclau's ([2005]: 119–

2 Though Marchart ([2019]: 27) hesitates to connect sublimation with emancipation, I suggest that sublimation enacts the very emancipatory *conflicting aesthetics* he evokes.

120) view that sublimation lies at the very heart of emancipatory populism. One is dealing here with «producing emptiness out of the operation of hegemonic logics» (Laclau [2005]: 166): the construction of a paradoxical counter-hegemonic hegemony that questions its own foundations and resists crystallization into a fixed order.

In this view, the emancipatory populism – this sublimatory *trans-populism* – aims to incorporate the subalternized, the «part of no-part», without hardening into a closed hegemony. As Rancière ([1995]: 31) observes, the «part of no-part» enters politics demanding equality, and in Arendt's ([1958]: 199) terms, the worldless step into the space of appearances to claim the «right to have rights». In this horizon, the reference to «the people» does not crystallize into an idealized, unquestionable symbol, but emerges as a truly empty signifier: a promise of inclusion for the marginalized that can only be honored by incessantly questioning its own identity. The mode of identification at stake here is therefore non-fixating: following Judith Butler ([2009]: 33), we might say that *trans-populism* combats precarity while embracing precariousness – the fact of our vulnerability, our openness to others.

At first glance, sublimation – and the mode of identification it sustains – might appear to require a renunciation of enjoyment. The opposite is true. It points instead to a more intense form of enjoyment than the phallic mode evoked earlier: an enjoyment of indeterminacy, of loss of control, of openness to the unknown (Revault d'Allonnes [2012]: 24-25). As Žižek ([2008]: 331) notes, sublime enjoyment is an experience of «absolute excess». Sublimation grants access to what Bataille ([1943]: 10) described as «a strange world where anguish and ecstasy intertwine»: an enjoyment beyond language – not outside discourse, but at its very limit, where signification falters and the materiality of the signifier itself becomes a source of affective intensity (Lacan [1973]: 97) –, an enjoyment in decentering, available only through the embrace of the unknown (Bataille [1943]: 66). Unlike the phallic mode – anchored in fantasies of obscene bravado and completeness – this enjoyment thrives on the unsettling of identity, on the subversive force of queer prurience that destabilizes rather than affirms (Lacan [1973]: 97). It resonates with forms of reveling in incompleteness, in disorientation, in openness – revelings that disrupt normative frames, that resist domestication, that delight in what unsettles the subject.

Conclusion

This article has sought to rethink identification by linking an aesthetic theory of populism with psychoanalysis. Identification has too often been understood as a regressive fusion into the masses, sustained by fantasies of authority and phallic enjoyment. Yet if populism is conceived as aesthetic transgression, we may begin to see other aesthetic practices linked to alternative modes of identification – practices

through which subjects previously excluded or rendered invisible in politics claim recognition and belonging in the name of equality.

The psychoanalytic notion of sublimation allows us to conceptualize this more emancipatory mode of identification. Sublimatory practices do not fix «the people» as an idealized image but keep it open, incomplete, and receptive to plurality. In this sense, sublimation can be read through a queer lens: it privileges openness, fluidity, and vulnerability over closure and idealization. When associated with sublimation, populist identification becomes a queer gesture that shifts affective investment away from fantasies of wholeness and toward the affirmation of incompleteness itself – a movement that unsettles identity while sustaining an ethics of the uncanny.

It is worth stressing, however, that such practices are never free of ambivalence: as Freud ([1914]: 94-95; [1921]: 113) warned, sublimation always risks sliding into idealization, thereby foreclosing critique. Identification, then, should not be conceived in binary terms – as either emancipatory or dominating – but as unfolding within a fragile and contested terrain, where the risk of blinding attachment coexists with the possibility of cultivating a queer, radically democratic ethics: an openness to plurality, contingency, and transgressive reconfigurations of the political.

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