REDESCRIPTIONS
Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

Mediators of Public Resonance: Cinematic Reflections on the Role of Iconic Figures of the 'Everybody' in Populist Political Processes

RESEARCH

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HUP HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS

ABSTRACT

This article analyses how the medium of film stages and reflects on populist political practices and on the main figures and ways of appearing, acting and relating they involve to create public resonance. In analysing two sample films – one (*Meet John Doe*, Frank Capra 1941) released in the United States in the early 1940s and the other (*Chez Nous*, Lucas Belvaux 2016) made in Europe in the 2010s – it shows in detail how populist leaders embody the role of a central iconic figure, the 'everybody', in addressing the audience as 'people' in opposition to an 'elite'. The central characteristics of such a figure and its functions in political discourses as well as the effects of its public performances and the stages it uses are disclosed. In addition, the article gives an insight into the genealogy and iconology of this figure. In this respect, it shows that for contemporary populism, the link of everybodies to the political myth of 'the people' re-emerging with the popular revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth century is most important.

In comparing the two sample films, the article discusses various concepts that are used in political theory to grasp the phenomenon of populism. By relating these concepts to the lived practices of populism depicted in the films, the key stylistic and performative features of populism are highlighted and the patterns of collective myths associated with it are revealed. At the same time, however, the change in populist political mobilisation from modernity to late modernity is also discussed. In this reading, popular film appears as a medium that does not represent an escape from social and political life but that leads us towards it and is able to vividly reflect upon how processes of political mediation work.

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KEYWORDS:
populism; aesthetic style; everybody; public resonance; iconic figure; popular film; politics of difference; universal-particular

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Schober, Anna. 2021. "Mediators of Public Resonance: Cinematic Reflections on the Role of Iconic Figures of the 'Everybody' in Populist Political Processes." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 24(2): 92–109. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.321*

DOI: 10.33134/rds.321

I. INTRODUCTION

How does populist discourse address its public? What are the main aesthetic tactics, iconic figures and ways of speaking and appearing in public that it employs to create resonance among spectators and citizens? What aesthetic, political and popular arts traditions do the aesthetic figurations and tactics circulated by populist discourse re-activate? This article[1] answers such questions by analysing how popular cinematic productions deal with a central iconic figure, the 'everybody', which populist leaders embody in a particular way[2] in staging 'the people' and in addressing the audience as 'people' in opposition to an 'elite'. A close reading of the *mise-en-scene* of this mediating figure grasps the specific offer that populist discourse proposes to spectators and citizens and also reveals aspects, meanings and questions in respect to the past and contemporary 'populist Zeitgeist' (Mudde 2004, 542) which are usually not explicitly addressed in the political sphere.

The first section introduces the concept of 'the everybody' based on the example film, *Meet John Doe* (1941) by Frank Capra, and discusses the tasks that this figure addressing the audience can assume in the realm of the political. At the same time, the everybody is also considered as a figure of thought, and insights are given into its genealogy and iconology.

The second section presents a close reading of *Meet John Doe*, whose title already refers to a 'John Doe' – a name used for centuries as a placeholder in English and US court cases when the true identity of a person is either unknown or when there is a preference for it to remain concealed, and which has subsequently become synonymous with 'the ordinary man'. This film is investigated from a visual studies perspective informed by political theory and the history of democracy as a cinematic reflection on populist political processes, with especially the role that such everyman figures play in addressing and involving the audience being looked at in detail. The central functions that such figures assume within political discourses are thematised.

The final section of the article addresses the contemporary 'populist revival' (Roberts 2007, 3) and discusses a contemporary European cinematic appropriation of the plot around an everybody figure and her exploitation as a political leader, which show similarities to political practices demonstrated by the *Front National* (*FN*) in France. Besides equivalences between how populism is depicted in the two films, the paper analyses the main transformations in the *mise-en-scène* of populism at the beginning of the new millennium, when it was emphatically re-invented in various European countries, not only in France but also in Italy, Spain, Greece, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Austria, Germany and Hungary (Taggart 2017). Using the example of the French film *Chez Nous* (*This is our Land*, Lucas Belvaux, 2016), the aesthetic-political tactics and iconic attraction figures now appearing in a transformed way

1 An earlier, shorter version of this article appeared in Italian as: Anna Schober, 'Un uomo di strada diventa un leader populista: Arriva John Doe (Capra 1941) come riflessione cinematografica sul ruolo degli "uomini qualunque" nei processi politici,' *Cinema e Storia* 1 (2019): 57–74. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (ref. SCHO 1454/1–1) funded the research upon which this article is based.

2 In his typology of representations of the 'good rulers', Pierre Rosanvallon (2018, 218f.) also mentions the '*homme-peuple*', which goes hand in hand with the claim to install a personalised power perceived as radically democratic. The *homme-peuple* can be expressed in totalitarian and populist versions – although these cannot be equated. Populist movements usually adhere to the electoral boundaries of democratic political systems, although there are strong tendencies to weaken them, as the recent example of Donald Trump shows.

DOI: 10.33134/rds.321

on the European political stage are investigated as central mediating devices of a new 'democracy of rejection' (Rosanvallon 2008, 123, 179) in which the people assert their sovereignty by periodically rejecting those in power, voters often turn into protesters and new forms of border regimes (Schulze Wessel 2017, 103–107) emerge, which can manifest themselves anywhere in social space. The particular aesthetics in which this film responds to contemporary populist practices informed by social media and surveillance practices is another pivot of its analysis.

II. WHO OR WHAT ARE EVERYBODIES?

In *Meet John Doe* (1941), Gary Cooper embodies an innocent, direct, 'simple' character. In the course of the film, however, he is built up into a popular political figure, a kind of leader for the masses because of crisis-like, random circumstances, which in the film are concretised as those of the United States during the Great Depression and in particular the media business of the time. In the film, the actor first appears as a tramp. As such, he is characterised as moving through various milieus, is not properly rooted in any of them but gives us a view of numerous social scenes. In casting Gary Cooper for this role, Capra chose a performer who does not submerge himself in his part, but 'who instead come[s] trailing clouds of association which are the residue of other parts, and whose "acting" has the bold simplicity of an icon rather than the literal detail of a photograph' (Dickstein 1983, 321). As a result, like Charlie Chaplin's tramp, he acquires 'a timeless and emblematic quality that distances [him from] ordinary poverty' (Dickstein 1983, 321).

This combination of a tramp and an iconic actor who in the course of the story also becomes a political figure addressing the masses turns this cinematic figure into an *everybody*, a figure of appeal and mediation (Schober 2019a) that feature films and other visual media frequently employ. The concept of 'everybody' (*l'homme ordinaire*) is taken from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life/L'invention du quotidien: 1 Arts de faire* (1988). According to de Certeau, the main function and achievement of this figure conveying an impression of ordinariness is the popularisation of knowledge and the dissemination of political positions. Through it, discourses can simultaneously be proven true and authenticated (de Certeau 1988, 2–3).[3] At the same time, through such 'general persons', existing certainties can be rejected, questioned and contested, and new meanings, world views and orders of things can achieve a breakthrough. The design of these figures refers to a reservoir of pre-existing images, often of previously marginalised or alien human forms. These are then adapted and transformed into a 'new man' or 'new woman', paving the way for a new public regime, in which a transformation of a subject culture (Reckwitz 2010, 69–79) and of political power relations (Schober 2019b, 61) converge.

From a sociological perspective, *everybodies* are variants of the figure of the third person (Fischer 2004, 78–86): although they usually appear with a very specific face as representatives of a particular social class, differentiated by gender, nation, race or ethnicity, they nevertheless address 'everybody', and hence speak to a potentially universal audience. In doing so *everybodies* trigger transition but can also be overpowering and generally act as ambivalent agents (Schober 2014). They mediate not only between the particular and the universal and the self and the other but also

3 On everybodies as figures of thought, especially in the work of Giorgio Agamben see: Schober 2014.

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between the private and the public, and in doing so bring about communion and reconciliation as well as being able to increase hate and resentment.

Historically, such discursive figures appear very early in the theatre – in the 'Everyman' plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (ca. 1510–1535) and their Dutch model *Elckerlijc*,[4] in which they convey both individual responsibility and community spirit to the audience. In addition, the everybody as a moral-ethical attitude towards the world also already existed in the sixteenth century, for example, in Montaigne (1998, 5, 78– 96), who cites 'random trivial figures' that enable other, likewise random and trivial figures to constitute themselves as private and political subjects.

However, for the question of the role these figures play for populist political movements and parties in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, another genealogical line is particularly important, in which elements of these earlier traditions are taken up. The main thesis formulated in this respect is that iconic figurations of the 'everybody' gained particular political momentum following the popular revolutions between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and in the course of this became re-figured as public agents linked to the insurgent crowd, providing a sensual physical presence and, with this, also a permanence of the modern, Western myth of the self-empowering people (Schober 2019b, 65). Figures of individual insurgents were thus pictured both as part of the people as a rebellious group of concrete persons and as carriers of a myth containing the power to transform society (Canovan 2005, 120). In this manifestation, everybodies appeared as physical-concrete points of connection and attraction for political mobilisation. Some of these figurations soon became iconic and were adopted and remediated using various 'visual vehicles' such as painting, photography, film, Internet platforms and live performance, which makes the iconography of the everybody a cross-media one.

Parallel to this development of political attractors in human form to appeal to the citizens as people, figures such as 'She' and 'I' appeared in literature in the eighteenth century, particularly in novels, through which the readership was trained in identificatory reading (Kittler 1985, 86f.). But also in theatre, where the classical 'everyman' had almost completely disappeared between the seventeenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, this material was revived and has experienced a lively performance history since the early twentieth century (Adolf 1957; Schmidt 2001, 397 and 44f.). The main playground of the everybody as a relational figure to address and involve the audience in modernity into a plot, however, is film: here a multitude of bodily, moral, ethical and political positions are staged to which the viewer can temporarily identify with and experience resonance in a variety of (bodily, imaginative, emotional) ways. Populist or not, in their attempt to stage an appeal, politicians can use the medium of film to increase their reach and presence, but, as the examples examined in this article show, films can also be used to reflect on the acquisition of political resonance and its entanglement with visual media.

III. THE TRAMP AS A WAY OF POLITICALLY ADDRESSING THE PUBLIC

Meet John Doe (1941) by Frank Capra represents a close observation of political processes based on a colourful appeal proclaiming the *vox populi* and the enthusiastic

4 These plays confront their audience with the existential experience of death and address the public directly through the figure of the everyman (Davidson et al. 2007, 9).

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followership this might trigger. The film starts with the journalist Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck) being fired by her employer because her approach is no longer considered up-to-date. In protest against her dismissal, she writes a fictional reader's letter signed by a certain 'John Doe', in which he announces that unless social conditions promptly improve, he will commit suicide that Christmas Eve by throwing himself off the town hall. As a result of this letter and the public debate it triggers, Ann Mitchell is reinstated and convinces her superior to take this opportunity to hire a 'real' John Doe as a spokesperson for social affairs. The unemployed tramp Long John Willoughby (Gary Cooper) is chosen to embody this role and, through the words that Ann continues to put in his mouth, becomes so morally convincing that numerous mutual support communities known as 'John Doe Clubs', oriented on countering the acute social crisis, mushroom all over the country. John Doe's charisma and cohesive power kindles a plan in the mind of the fascistic editor of the *Bulletin*, D. B. Norton, to use him for his own political aims, which gives rise to a range of complications that for his followers cast doubt on John Doe's authenticity and the morality of his actions. The film also shows how, as part of this process, the initial fascination and enthusiasm that his followers invest in John Doe can suddenly tip into hatred and persecution. This ultimately leads John Doe to wish to fulfil his promises of authenticity, which he embodies in his role, precisely by committing suicide as he had pledged at the start of the film in the words his inventor had put in his mouth. In the released version of the film,[5] however, John Willoughby alias John Doe is prevented from the planned suicide by a small group of supporters who still believe in him, providing the story with a happy ending. As Frank Capra (Glatzer 1975, 34) dryly commented: 'You can't kill Gary Cooper'.

Insofar as John Doe is presented as a figure who succeeds in mobilising others to form communities that stand for the people, who are pitted against an elite or what Margaret Canovan (1999, 3) calls 'the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values in society', it can be said that this film portrays populist political processes, because the division between 'the people' and 'the establishment' or 'the elite' is one of the core features of populism (Judis 2016, 88; Moffitt 2020, 21; Mudde 2004, 543). In addition, the kind of politics presented in this film is shown as something that is performed and has to do with language, issues of accent, physical appearance, gestures and ways of dressing that in one way or the other are characterised by a 'flaunting of the low' in terms of relating to the people, appearing before their eyes and decision-making (Ostiguy 2017, 77). More historically precise, in this film Capra engages with the widespread populist conceptions and practices during the interwar years in the United States. On the one hand, these are tendencies that emanated particularly from the middle class and were aimed against the New Deal, which was largely supported by the left and the underprivileged. The John Doe Clubs, for example, reflect various Christian populist movements such as the *Share Our Wealth Clubs* founded by the populist politician Huey Long or the *National Union for Social Justice* by the radio priest Father Coughlin (Brinkley 1982).[6] These movements constituted an 'optimistic populism' (Phelps 1979, 391), which displayed 'great reverence for the individual' (Glatzer 1975, 39). It was characterised by an

5 Frank Capra (1997, 302; McBride 1992, 431) writes in his autobiography that he had difficulties finding an ending for this film. He realised several endings and tested them by showing them to the press and various audiences.

6 On the visualisation of post-Depression America from a *common man* and middle-class perspective, see also: Zagarrio (2009, 125).

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'equality of opportunity, self-help tempered by good neighbourliness, leadership by decent men, opposition to the Big Business complex' (Richards 1976, 67). At the same time, however, the 1930s were also characterised by a strong political mobilisation on the left, and John Doe in his faded and torn denim-outfit also resembles the industrial union worker, the 'forgotten man' who Roosevelt evoked in a speech he gave in 1932 as a reason to rebuild the country and the economy from the bottom-up (Gage 2016). Although the film's depiction of the John Doe Clubs alludes more to conservative populist movements, it is left open whether John Doe gives a voice and a face to a right-wing or left-wing mobilisation. Rather, populism is portrayed as a political force that involves a range of discursive resources and performative practices that can be put to very different uses.[7]

At the same time, however, this film also involves us in a reflection – for example, through the aesthetic tactic of the narrative view behind giving us glimpses of the fabrication of this political *mise-en-scène* – which conveys scepticism and disappointment in relation to such populist currents. Furthermore, there is a second, similar tramp figure in the film, the colonel (played by Walter Brennan), a friend and companion (a 'hobo sidekick') of John Willoughby's. He constantly functions as a kind of contrasting figure, who through his sarcastic comments also addresses and attacks the neighbourly helping and do-gooding ideology of the John Doe movement and the John Doe Clubs. Accordingly, Morris Dickstein, for example, states that in this film Capra begins: 'to parody some of the populist attitudes he has pushed in the 1930s. The John Doe Clubs and "the John Doe idea," which is Capra's own cherished ideal of good will and personal benevolence, are ludicrously inadequate to the problems they face, and to the villains who manipulate them from the very start' (Dickstein 1983, 330).

Mainly, however, this film demonstrates the centrality of the everybody figure for the constitution of 'the people' against 'the elite'. The people, according to Margaret Canovan, thereby needs to be understood as being neither a natural, organic entity nor an artificial construction but as 'the contingent outcome of intersecting actions by a multitude of political actors, none of them in a position to foresee or control the result' (Canovan 2005, 55). It is at the same time a number of concrete individuals taking action in a specific time at a specific place and an abstract collective entity, a kind of myth of salvation (Canovan 2005, 120f.). Hence populism appears as something that is done rather than being solely a property of political actors or an ideology (Moffitt 2020, 24; Ostiguy 2017, 74), even if the resistance that populism develops vis à vis elite political culture, often imbued with values commonly labelled 'liberal', such as individualism, multiculturalism, internationalism or progress-orientation, can amount to something like an 'ideology' (Canovan 1999, 4). As already mentioned, *Meet John Doe* does not foreground whether the kind of mobilisation that the tramp as an everybody triggers can be labelled left or right. What is more emphasised is the portrayal of how John Doe as a confrontational personalised leader motivates citizens and infuses them with a collective enthusiasm, which, however, can easily tip over into expressions of fanatical hate and resentment (Girard 1999, 145; Schober 2014, 266f.). In this respect, the styles and sociocultural elements, for example in the form of scripts, stages, and the *habitus* of those that appear in public as populists, are made graspable throughout the film. The latter in particular is supported by the acting skills of Gary Cooper and by the medium of film as one that can capture

7 This is also highlighted by Ernesto Laclau (2007, 176) in his definition of populism.

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physical appearance, facial expressions and gestures, and convey them to the audience, for instance, through close-ups. *Meet John Doe* thus represents populism as an everyday practice and in doing so enters into a complicity with theoreticians of populisms following a discursive-performative approach, such as Margaret Canovan (1999), Ernesto Laclau (2007) or Benjamin Moffitt (2016, 2020).[8] But what are the main characteristics of such figures, the stages they employ, their performances and their audiences that this film shows us?

III.1. CONNECTION: UNIVERSAL-PARTICULAR

The brief outline of the plot has already shown that in the narration of this film the position of the *everybody* figure is propelled by 'John Doe', who is simultaneously an everybody and a nobody and is only coincidentally made into this concrete character in flesh and blood. The *everybody* occurs as an appealing and at the same time transgressive figure: it potentially addresses 'everybody', that is, a broad, even universal circle of spectators and listeners, and in doing so, as the film demonstrates, it can forge connections between previously often hostile or reciprocally ignorant social positions. In tension with this universalising role, however, the film also shows that it is precisely the particularity of John Willoughby alias 'John Doe' and his 'low' way of relating to people (Ostiguy 2017, 77f.), that is, his weather-beaten face, his faded dungarees, his crumpled hat, uninhibited conduct and a certain brittleness in speaking that distinguishes his voice from the usual polished speechmaking voices, that constitutes his charisma and leads to the emotional involvement and activation of the audience. Above and beyond this, in one scene sitting by a fire, the tramp John Willoughby also embodies a nostalgia for a vanished America, an idealised, pre-urban America. This means that part of the staging of John Willoughby alias John Doe as an attractor for a broad audience is presenting him as an example of home-pride. This is also done by showing him as an enthusiastic baseball player, the most popular sport in the United States, closely connected to national morality. In this role he appears as a sportsman with an attractive physical appearance and – despite his initial awkwardness and scepticism – with an increasing ability for social adaptation, which makes him a kind of 'new man' of 'organised modernity' (Wagner 1993).[9] His opponents are exponents of the 'high' in the form of intellectuals and members of the elite, 'the patronizing, jargon-ridden, ivory tower dweller, isolated from the common people' (Richards 1976, 70). In the film, these are represented by newspaper reporters, advertising executives or players in the political machine in a narrower sense.

III.2. AUTHENTICITY

A main feature of the everybody in *Meet John Doe* is Long John's authenticity. This impression is achieved through presenting him as natural, spontaneous and novel (Montgomery 2001, 403f.) instead of formal, artificial and stale, for example, by highlighting his use of folksy expressions or his spontaneous bodily or facial expressions, which are captured by close-ups or are shown by his demonstrative

8 This approach is distinct from two other ones (Moffitt 2020, 12f., 17f.) regarding populism either as an ideology – more precisely a 'thin centered ideology' (Mudde 2004, 543) that is usually combined with other ideologies – or as a strategy. The latter approaches populism through a focus on the role of the leader (Wayland 2017).

9 As such, John Doe opposes the earlier hegemonial culture of the self that emphasised the bourgeois professional subject that was not socially positioned in a group-oriented way (Reckwitz 2010, 358).

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performance in front of an inner-filmic audience. Even more emphatically, however, the main character's authenticity is staged by capturing talk that seems to present his 'true' experience or by presenting acts of emotional self-disclosure (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 68), linked with a wealth of actions and gestures that all in one way or the other reject the conventions of the establishment. Central to this are the speeches that Ann puts into his mouth, which are very personal and reflect his emotions. But the rejection of the establishment is also indicated by his body language, his clothes and – connected to this – sometimes his embarrassed behaviour in the new environment. So, for instance, in several scenes depicting him as a tramp, his worn, torn clothes are shown, with him ashamedly trying to hide the tears in his outfit. By depicting an obsession with baseball or by showing him playing the harmonica this authenticity is also characterised as 'nativist' and showing local traits.

Moreover, the above-mentioned narrative view behind serves for authentication, because it gives a stage to clandestine and unvarnished self-disclosure. Through it the audience, for example, experiences how much John Willoughby hates the efforts to embody the political leader John Doe and how much he yearns for his earlier free life as a tramp. At the same time, and from the outset, the expressly demonstrated authenticity of the figure is addressed in the film as one that was formed and constructed for an audience by Ann Mitchell, for example, in her initial letter. However, the film also shows that this 'fabrication' does not cancel out its effect.

The resonances this mask of authenticity is able to trigger are also overtly presented throughout the film as something ambivalent. This staged authenticity makes politics personal and immediate and confronts another way of doing politics, which in this way seems all the more remote and bureaucratic (Canovan 1999, 14). As such, it impresses and convinces not only the public but also Long John himself, which towards the end of the film will bring him to grow into his role morally and become the sacrificial social figure he was styled as in the fictional reader's letter right at the beginning. At the same time, this pronounced authenticity leads to a kind of fusion between the leader and his followers, appearing in the form of a discourse of love (Ostiguy 2017, 83), which also establishes a demarcation between 'us' and 'them' and can amount to a totalitarian closure.

III.3. TRIGGERING AFFECTS AND RESONANCES

The film identifies John Doe as a figure that is closely related to other people's desires – those of Ann Mitchell, who 'invented' him, of the activists in the John Doe Clubs, who are mobilised by him as citizens, and the media tycoon D. B. Norton, who tries to exploit him. He motivates this desire through his simplicity and directness and the spontaneity of his actions. Through the effects that this desire triggers, however, he is also encouraged to further cultivate his role as John Doe. The desire-based relationship between *everybody* and the recipient is also repeated as well as addressed through the film's *mise-en-scène*. Thus at a key point in the film, when John Willoughby alias John Doe speaks to his intra-filmic audience for the first time over the radio, he is shown in full face close-ups, so that we as the audience of the film assume almost exactly the same position as the enthusiastic and admiring masses in the film. At this point, but also at other moments, we are expressly called on to imagine ourselves in the position of the emotionally involved recipients of the speeches made by this extraordinary person situated in a specific media setting.

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But we as the audience are also included in the film by another media tactic: through the narrative *view behind*, from the beginning we are privy to the 'doubling' of the leading character. The complications that arise in the course of the film and the repeated moving away that John Willoughby practices here vis à vis the position of John Doe, however, request us in the auditorium also to observe the social dynamics that John Willoughby triggers as an *everybody* from a certain distance. In this way, the film simultaneously puts us in a position in which we are called upon to relate to the main character emotionally as well as in one in which we are brought to observe how populism is put into practice and especially the ambivalences that accompany it. This comes to the fore most prominently in a sequence in which the initial enthusiasm of the masses for John Doe tips over into hate and persecution as a result of the skilful defamation by D. B. Norton. The map of the spreading John Doe Clubs that is repeatedly shown in the first major part of the film, marking a geography of desire in respect to 'John Doe', thereby suddenly transforms into one of pure anger.

IV. CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN APPROPRIATIONS OF POPULISM

Meet John Doe is a reflection on populism as a mediatised performance of politics, which 'has the revivalist flavour of a movement, powered by the enthusiasm that draws normally unpolitical people into the political arena' (Canovan 1999, 6). The film focuses on the populist movement's leader, his audiences, and on how a relationship between the leader and his followers emerges and changes, but it is also about the various stages (newspapers, radio, live performance and tour) and political forums (stadiums, assembly rooms and streets and the meetings, large gatherings and marches taking place in them) as well as about the range of people 'behind the scenes'.[10] Because of this, it appears astonishingly close to contemporary forms of populism, in which central processes of political representation and decision-making seem to express as well as to promote media tendencies such as polarisation, personalisation and a focus on scandals and emotions in combination with anti-establishment attitudes (Moffitt 2016, 75–77).

In a very pronounced form, and although there are certainly also differences, contemporary populists such as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen or Beppe Grillo show some of the characteristics that Capra highlighted in *Meet John Doe*. They all demonstrate the centrality of the mediatised leader who seeks to exploit the (constitutive) gap between the promise of a better world and the (often seemingly defective and boring) real existing performance of democracy (Canovan 1999, 12). Like John Doe, they manage to create powerful impressions of authenticity and credibility by rejecting prevailing conventions in their performances – for example, by employing the self-culture style of the rebellious artist such as Beppe Grillo or using politically incorrect, 'bad' expressions such as Donald Trump or Marine le Pen. Their direct, 'low' style goes along with a 'characteristic mood' (Canovan 1999, 6) turning politics into something like a campaign or a movement. On the various public stages, the personal, singular and the exceptional is foregrounded in connection with these

10 For long stretches, the film, for example, refers to practices coined by Charles Edward Coughlin, commonly known also as 'Father Coughlin' or as the 'Radio Priest', a Catholic priest who became a very successful populist politician opposing Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal in the 1930s. He was one of the first to use radio to reach a mass audience and attracted millions of weekly listeners. On these practices, see: Brinkley (1982, 83).

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charismatic leaders – so strongly that it tends to be overlooked that they are still staging a universal address to potentially each and everyone in the audience. They manage to be perceived as strong leaders, able to solve the crisis they themselves perform[11] and in this way to defend the people against its enemy, which – in the European scene – is now often a combination of the corrupt elites and other groups defined as 'threats', especially immigrants, Muslims, multiculturalists and globalists. A politicisation of regional belonging is often used to express more diffuse experiences of a lack and of frustrations in relation to politics in general (Taggart 2017, 254).

Such a contemporary re-invention of populism is reflected in *Chez Nous* (*This is Our Land*, Lucas Belvaux, 2016), a film that not only shows the most diverse parallels with how populism is staged in *Meet John Doe* but also makes historical transformations graspable. It is a French film with the action located in northern France, where the *FN* began making gains in the 1990s, especially in working-class areas (Judis 2016, 103). The film thus deals with the fact that today, unlike the 1930s, populism is also a strongly European political phenomenon – something that is historically quite new, since, as Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser have shown, the first decades of the post-World War II era and to a large extent also before populism was 'almost totally absent from European politics' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 33).

Both the story and the way the film involves the spectators through the narrative view behind are strikingly similar to *Meet John Doe*. Here, too, a young person, Pauline (Émilie Dequenne), who works as a community nurse in a small town in the Pas-de-Calais in northern France, is selected as a mayoral candidate to provide credibility and authenticity for a populist party. Again, similar to the Capra film, through the narrative view behind we as the public are privy to this undertaking from the beginning. Through Pauline as a guiding everybody figure, we are invited to closely observe how contemporary populism is practised and how she serves as a vivid mediator for making politics personal and immediate.

In contrast to the Capra film, however, and connected to an observation of contemporary populist practices, the film reflects on identity formation as a highly unstable, conflicted, contradictory and liminal process.[12] It portrays everyday life in a small town in the rural periphery, characterised by multiculturalism as expressed in 'ethnic' restaurants and social circles with mixed backgrounds – something, however, that is sharply contrasted with the presence of aggressive and violent practices of identity politics by local militant right-wing groups.

Pauline is represented as a woman whose family history is rooted in the region, a mobile caregiver with excellent social contacts with a sick, left-wing, former communist father, but also as a single mother crushed between a most flexible and demanding form of employment, various private care responsibilities and the adjustment to different and competing desires that are expressed towards her. At the beginning, Pauline is shown as having no interest in party politics at all but being alert to the political and social tendencies around her. The film depicts her as a contemporary 'everywoman', whose day-to-day experiences appear torn between traditional expectations and a contemporaneity marked by fragmentation, competing gender models and her own contradictory aspirations. Although, here, the subject model for a contemporary

11 According to Moffitt (2016, 114), the performance of crisis and spectacularisation of failure is part of contemporary populist appearances. It allows populists to present their appeal with urgency and to legitimate strong leadership.

12 As Ilaria De Pascalis (2015, 51) shows, this reflection on identity as being in process is what characterises European cinema today.

DOI: 10.33134/rds.321

everybody is female,[13] the way the heroine is represented shows the extraordinary potential of gender and gender expectations to be fluid and to be re-accentuated and even re-invented in different ways.

In the course of the film, Pauline is promoted to fill in the role of a populist leader by an authoritative, fatherly colleague, Philippe Berthier (André Dussollier), a medical doctor with a radical right-wing past. In the scene where he tries to convince her to stand for mayor, the doctor explicitly acknowledges her difference as a woman and how important this is for the role he has chosen for her: 'It is women who will change the world', he says. At such moments, the film comments on a European trend (Fassin 2019, 10; Moffitt 2020, 76) – ranging from Geert Wilders in the Netherlands to Marine le Pen in France – of linking liberal demands such as those related to gender or sexuality with populism by at the same time setting up a binary opposition to the alleged misogyny and sexism of immigrant communities. Through her newly re-encountered first love, Stephane, known as 'Stanko', who – without her knowledge – spends his time chasing foreigners and refugees in the surrounding woods, Pauline is also linked to a neo-fascist boys' club, which extends into the populist party for which she will assume a leading position. This accentuates the contradictions she is shown as being entangled in and transfers them into the arena of the political, in which 'the people' constituted by populist movements can become synonymous with a 'nation' whose enemies are ethnically and culturally 'others'.

Just as in *Meet John Doe*, where we encounter a tramp turning into a populist leader who, in the process, traverses various contexts and social milieus, in *Chez Nous* Pauline also takes us into various social milieus, which she gets us to consider from within, through her job but also as a friend and a lover. The individuals and small families to which she accompanies us are from different social classes, educational levels and professions – similar to the *FN* membership under Marine Le Pen in the new millennium, which tripled between 2011 and 2014.[14] Not only through a client who she finds dead at the beginning of the film but also through all the other suffering people she has to deal with in her job, she is closely linked to experiences of ineluctability – again similar to John Willoughby through the risk of committing suicide.

Much of the film is concerned with the changes that overturn Pauline's social relations after she decides to assume the role of candidate for the mayor's office. First, we see how she is transformed in a media-friendly way – from an unspectacular but beautiful middle-aged brunette and mother full of simplicity and sincerity, she is dyed blonde and is presented as a spectacular media face, which, however, appears completely silenced, like a dummy. Behind the scenes, as we also observe, she is hardly allowed to make any decisions. The 'incestuous elite', against which she is positioned, is depicted as composed of the political establishment, especially mainstream parties, institutions of the financial world such as Wall Street and the European Central Bank, and 'aggressive Islam', and is merged with immigrants, 'beneficiaries' and 'uprooted workers'. In the second part of the film, we witness how the sympathies she was entrusted with by the various local social circles at the beginning are overturned and changed after her transformation into a politician. Trustingly, some of her clients now start telling her about their fears, for example, in respect to immigrants, which

13 On female and queer figures as subject models for post-modern self-cultures see: Reckwitz (2010, 463).

14 Since about 2011, the FN became a 'catch-all' party without changing its values of taking an anti-immigration stance, being authoritarian, anti-egalitarian and focusing on national sovereignty (Stockemer 2017, 76).

DOI: 10.33134/rds.321

are turned into racist fantasies or conspiracy theories, whereas others – for instance, a Muslim woman and her daughter whom she had cared for – begin displaying rejection or disturbance. A polarisation emerges, which soon leads to aggression and even violence, stirred up by the extremist right-wing club around Stephane – as we get to know again through the narrative view behind. In this pronounced depiction of a reversal of desire and enthusiasm into hate fuelled by manipulative tactics of fascist forces, there are also strong parallels with *Meet John Doe*.

In both films, there are other, similar figures – the 'colonel' in *Meet John Doe* and two women of similar age in *Chez Nous* – who act as contrasting figures to sharpen the profile of the main characters. Pauline is on the one hand contrasted with Nada (Charlotte Talpaert), a young woman with southeastern European roots and her (former) friend who engages in political activism against xenophobia. At the same time, Pauline is set in relation to Natalie (Anne Marivin), who initially supports and encourages her to get involved with the right-wing party but – after Pauline resigns as a mayoral candidate – drops her and, towards the end of the film, finally takes her place as the political hope and candidate of the populist party. While Nada challenges xenophobic views in her circle of friends and in the small town and shows civil courage and activist engagement, Natalie clearly expresses right-wing views. Her extremist attitudes are underlined by her son, who, initially unnoticed by his mother, radicalises himself on the internet and launches a dystopian video in which radical Islamists take power in France. By situating Pauline between these two female figures, with whom she maintains a close but in both cases not a tension-free relationship, it remains unclear whether she can be assigned to the right, xenophobic side or the left, critical of racism.

As is typical in contemporary film-making (de Pascalis 2015, 62–63), from the beginning, screens and various forms of visual media, especially photographs, are important to the narrative in *Chez Nous* – something that contributes to the sense of fragmentation and juxtaposition the film conveys. Through the various recording techniques shown, but above all through point-of-view shots of the supervising agents from the populist party for which she will stand, we see that Pauline and all her relationships – even the most private ones – are constantly monitored. When, again by means of a dossier of photographs and newspaper-clippings, the doctor confronts Pauline with the violent, militant right-wing past of Stephane, who has become her regular lover and firm partner, she remains true to herself and her love and chooses to leave the party. The party, however, pre-empts this act and removes her from the candidacy as 'objectionable'.

Towards the end of the film, as a happy ending seems possible after all, the film demonstrates a further differentiation: between those who see foreigners and immigrants as barbarians living on the margins of humanity and who treat them accordingly, hunting them in the woods like animals, and others who, like Pauline, see themselves on an equal footing and are able to put themselves in supportive relations to foreigners, recognising their dignity. Here, too, visual media, and especially the act of photographing and being photographed, again play an important role as a catalyst of events: several times during the hunt for refugees, Stephane photographs himself on his mobile phone with his victims, posing as a victor, gun at the ready and staging those captured as trophies. In the course of a visit to the football stadium at the end of the film, the newly formed family take several selfies. Using the camera's return function, Pauline accidentally discovers the images of her lover picturing himself in a proud pose, holding the refugees at bay and presenting them as trophies

DOI: 10.33134/rds.321

– all of a sudden, she realises his threatening and devastating attitude and instantly establishes a further differentiation and separation. In a context marked by anonymity, fragmentation, social decline, pronounced and often violent contrasts and strange coexistences that Pauline is situated in throughout the film, such sharp polarisations and the separating function that charismatic (male and female) everybody figures can exert come most sharply into the foreground. This appears to be the biggest difference that *Chez Nous* identifies vis à vis the populist reality staged by Frank Capra in the 1940s. In addition, John Doe is shown as gradually fitting into a larger whole and managing to grow morally, whereas Pauline is constantly torn between different, competing models of action and contradictory aspirations. But similar to John Doe, she is also searching for something: a new life, providing stability in times of strange coexistences and non-connectedness as she and Stephane express it at various points in the film.

V. CONCLUSION: MEDIATORS OF POPULISMS IN TRANSFORMATION

To sum up, in both films the central role of everybodies for the development of populist political movements is demonstrated and analysed. Both Pauline and Long John are depicted as being used as kind of affective interfaces to constitute a 'people' positioned against an elite – with this people not necessarily being the same as the 'common people'. The fact that both are amateurs, completely lacking political experience, is exposed as a basic condition for being trusted to exercise an appeal to 'the people'. The central characteristics that the films assign to them are self-disclosure and authenticity, even in a staged and invented form, the triggering of emotions and resonance and an ethical attitude characterised by a display of individuality and community spirit. In one way or another, a 'flaunting of the low' (Ostiguy 2017, 77) is noticeable in their physical presence and appearance as well as in their gestures and language. At the same time, at first neither of the main characters recognise the fascism of the parties they appear for, that is, they are also characterised as somehow ingenuous and naive people. As both *Meet John Doe* and *Chez Nous* demonstrate, with its recording and registering function, also in relation to the human figure and especially the human face, the medium of film enters into a kind of complicity with populism, as it is particularly able to confront us with 'authentic' doppelgangers of ourselves. With the cinema performer: 'the physical existence of a person [is] present on the screen in overwhelming size. The camera actually picks out a fleeting glance, a casual shrug' (Kracauer 1985, 137). At the same time, the performer remains an 'object among objects' (Kracauer 1985, 139) that can all look back at the audience and so create contact and involvement. The bodily dimension of this figure and the 'touching' resonance it can create in the spectator are thus emphasised by the medium of film.

Populism appears in both films as a particular way of doing politics that exploits the gap between what is and what could be. It emerges not only as a political performance and a praxis but also as a kind of rapport for which a certain style, certain patterns and affectual narratives (Canovan 1999, 5; Moffitt 2016, 5– 6; Ostiguy 2017, 74f.) can be identified, even if historically and regionally they are played out in very different ways. The films explore the public stages they are employed on and how they are used in detail. In the form of personalised stories, they also show the effects of the public performances of charismatic leaders. Finally, what happens back stage in populism

DOI: 10.33134/rds.321

is also disclosed and it is made present how this affects their leaders as well as public events as a whole.

In the case of both main characters, their role as mediating everybodies is presented as a very ambivalent one. This consists in the fact that – as particular 'ordinary people' – they bolster claims of veracity and convey emotions creating a connection and emotional bond with some in the audience, thus establishing an 'us' against 'them'. They evoke approval and even love, but they assume an increasingly polarising role in the course of the stories that they motivate. Like love, hate and resentment also prove to be the motor of socialisation (or disintegration). Both films emphasise the transformation of love into hate and resentment – albeit in different ways. The mediating role of the John Doe as everybody is mainly shown as leading to the formation of almost homogeneous, self-contained and internally conflict-free communities throughout the country, which after the turn towards the dissemination of hate and resentment appear in an equally uniform way as a wave of anger and unanimous condemnation. In contrast, *Chez Nous* portrays a society full of multiple, often sharp polarisations and violent conflicts, especially in relation to immigration, multiculturalism and globalisation. The populist party for which Pauline is running is portrayed as building on existing contradictions, subliminal perceptions and the expression of resentment and conflicts, creating polarisations that deepen rather than resolve conflicts. *Chez Nous* thus underlines the analysis by Wendy Brown (1993, 401) that today, because of the tension between freedom and equality and the assumption that contemporary subjects have inherent self-reliant and self-made capacities, combined with unacknowledged dependencies on a multiplicity of relationships and forces, 'all liberal subjects, and not only markedly disenfranchised ones [are] vulnerable to ressentiment.' As both films show, this resentment cannot always be separated from revolt, just as populism and citizenism cannot be clearly distinguished.[15] One line along which a distinction can be drawn, however, is the attitude towards immigrants and refugees. The populist party for which Pauline is chosen as a candidate is characterised by a sharp demarcation of multiculturalism and the expression of hatred towards migrants. It has its offshoots in fascist groups that also use violence against refugees. This is contrasted by collective manifestations of protest against xenophobia stirred by committed citizens such as Nada, Pauline's (former) friend. A similar distinction in relation to contemporary populism as presented in this film is also made by John Judis (2016, 15), who points out that: 'leftwing populists champion the people against an elite or an establishment. [...] Rightwing populists champion the people against an elite that they accuse of coddling a third group, which can consist, for instance of immigrants, Islamists or African American militants'.[16]

15 Eric Fassin (2019, 81) seeks to establish such a distinction. However, he fails to recognise that revolt and resentment cannot be neatly separated, but that practices of mediated politics are 'often far messier and more emotional than dominant normative ideals might imply' (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 19).

16 However, his conclusion (Judis 2016, 15) that left-wing populism is dyadic and right-wing populism triadic cannot be supported. Left-wing populism is also often triadic because in it, too, certain groups – such as the bourgeoisie, former allies, academics and sometimes foreigners – are regularly associated with hostility and resentment. Analysis and the expression of resentment cannot always be clearly distinguished here either. Rene Girard (1999, 20; Schober 2014, 266f.) shows that structures of desire such as those at play in populism are always determined by a triad, since mediators of desire always appear in them and the relationship between subject and mediator threatens to change from an admiring to a hostile one.

Although the populist parties in both films tend to be assigned to the right-wing political spectrum, the actions of Long John and Pauline are clearly attributable neither to the right nor to the left – they are geared towards mobilisation beyond the established party spectrum and take up perceptions and problematic issues that that have to do with what is experienced as a lack in everyday life. Both leaders appear in a way 'chosen' but are at the same time sacrificed and scapegoated by the masterminds of the political machinery of the party for which they stand. So, for example, similar to followers of contemporary European populists such as activists of Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord, Pauline is shown as enacting a kind of mimetism (Dematteo 2011, 53–54) and turning into a local 'clone' of the national leader of the party, who at the same time is depicted as being endowed with the power to destroy her followers.

Lucas Belvaux's film stages contemporary populist practices as part of a social reality shaped and transmitted by a variety of visual media, most importantly social media, digital media and optical surveillance techniques, which are shown as repeatedly assuming an active role – also in advancing the film's narrative. In the Capra film, in contrast, in tension with John Doe's visual and physical presence, it is his voice that is thematised as being responsible for his success as a leader – a brittle, clumsy voice on the radio that enters people's private homes even in the remotest areas of the country. This voice triggers resonance, whereas in the case of Pauline it seems initially to be her caring, relating attitude as a nurse and her broad involvement in the local community. In her case, this resonance vanishes as she is transformed into a media-friendly icon of political protest, cut off from former relations. Together with the various (monitoring) images she encounters and which make her change the ways she has chosen, the image into which she is transformed provokes helplessness, violence and withdrawal. Hence, Capra still seems to attribute a strong mobilising, albeit polarising, potential to visual and above all acoustic media in connection with political (populist) processes. In contrast, Belvaux almost exclusively emphasises the divisive, destructive, controlling and – in the case of Stephane using his smartphone to show refugees as trophies – also the triumphantly self-congratulatory and thus again violent role of visual media in the present. However, it is again a visual medium, his film, that leads us to contemporary conflicts and the social, political and psychological dispositions associated with them.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Schober, Anna. 2021. "Mediators of Public Resonance: Cinematic Reflections on the Role of Iconic Figures of the 'Everybody' in Populist Political Processes." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 24(2): 92–109. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.321*

Submitted: 06 April 2020
Accepted: 10 June 2021
Published: 16 December 2021

Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.

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