

Helicopter Morality

On the social psychology of fast judgments

By Wolfgang Schmidbauer

A characteristic of the helicopter moral is the fast, dramatic judgment that completely ignores the classical separation of powers: Accusation equals the verdict 'guilty'. The accused loses position, agency and reputation before the allegations are clarified. The helicopter moral represents a kind of moral precision landing, which produces powerful wind, blows everything in the air and which often takes off again as fast as it had landed. It is related to terrorism insofar as it too has a lot of theatricality and escapes the orientation towards a stable exchange, reconciliation and tolerance.

The courtroom is the purest 'front vacation' even for people whose activities are dominated by the public, compared to a shitstorm, which has been whirled up by the helicopter wings. The media are fed juicy details and often enough excerpts from files that should be confidential. As unfinished as an investigation may be, it will be leaked to someone and will be online hours later.

As a result, the court is again under pressure to act on that. As soon as the public is saturated with prejudices, it will be hard for a court to dismiss a case. One would expose oneself to the suspicion of measuring with unequal measure and drawing the storm of indignation on itself.

The gap between a just punishment for misconduct and a destroyed life opens up ever further. The cry of morality drowns any straight forward question as to what has really happened. In times of helicopter morale an accumulated reputation explodes with the first suspicion. The shards hit the bystanders, ruining a few more careers or threatening to do so. Nobody is responsible for the damage.

The relationship of helicopter morality to the phenomenon described as "helicopter parents" is obvious. A first example:

It was many years ago. My eldest daughter, a gracious and energetic person, was on the Munich Underground for the first time at the age of ten. An elderly lady watched the child, proud of her own courage that she travelled to her friend on her own. She said, "So young and traveling alone? Do you not know how dangerous that is?" At home, the child reported that the ride was fun and easy to navigate, but that remark had frightened and confused her. "What should I have told her?"

Among other things, the question of the worried woman reveals how easily a narcissistic gratification can be won by spreading the feathers of one's own foresight. Showing an erect penis in a train compartment is punishable; the judgmental, pedagogically acting exhibitionism not only gets away with it with impunity, it also leads to a good conscience, even if the embarrassing consequences for the victim are undeniable.

At the same time, it becomes clear from the scene how the moral instruction serves as a defence for fear. Psychoanalysts suspect that the exhibitionistic perversion also serves to ward off fears that one's own genitals could not be attractive enough and could dissolve in femininity like a tear in the ocean. Similarly, the woman who frightens the adventurous child overcomes her own fear of not being maternal enough, by offending the child on the one hand, and leaving her alone with the fears now aroused.

It's not about blaming morality at all. It's about her abuse, over-zealousness, transgression in the service of the narcissistic needs of the zealots. Morals can be abused, as well as a weapon or physical strength. It can serve the sensationalism or the Pharisaic shudder in the face of the inferiority of others. Then it leads to a stupid know-it-all in private as well as in politics. It causes conflicts to escalate in bloodshed because one side is attributed an abyss of moral failure that cannot be bridged by negotiation.

It is a peculiarity of psychoanalytic social psychology to link individual and political aspects. In the light of helicopter morality, it focusses on the causes and consequences for the individual and for society. An important link is the orientation of the consumer societies to individual events, to events that are easier to grasp and evaluate - with the disadvantage of a loss of foresighted and comprehensive planning. Not only in ethics, but also in economy and politics, proportionality and long-term consequences are given little consideration. In an effort to seem energetic, gripping, anticipatory, these values are lost.

An important quality of helicopter morality, which also illuminates the satisfaction of narcissistic needs, is the downfall of an idol. The devaluation of a person who has been thought to be something better supports one's own ego. The victim has to reckon with the fact that harmless deeds, which it believes that are long barred and overcome, can suddenly resurface and can be laid with great force on his present life, like projecting a slide on an existing image, which gives the picture below a whole new meaning.

Where there is much to suppress and therefore to uncover, these crashes are particularly dramatic. The year 1945 was in Germany perhaps more than in all other years and countries one of displaced and denied history. One would like to believe that moral judgments are not suitable for intellectual competition, such as athletic achievements or the ability to answer quiz questions. But in the context of helicopter morality it is the desire to ascertain the superiority of one's own judgment. And hardly anything is better suited for a demonstration of this superiority than to lift a moral issue to the pedestal, and then throw it down with a din. See, he's a bad man, a liar, and he wanted to make us think he was something better, a Nobel laureate!

The German writer Günther Grass was drafted as a 17-year-old to the Waffen-SS. He was known to have been a soldier for a short time and previously a young Nazi enthusiast. The palpable difference between Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS was minimal in 1945 for a 17-year-old. Grass had never claimed to have been against the Nazis in 1945, on the contrary. He emphasized personally and described masterfully in the 'Blechtrommel' how the Greater Germany of the outside led to the dwarfing of the inside.

Now, in an interview, Grass talked about his life story ("The Skinning of the Onion") of the SS runes on his collar and in the book itself he told about the chaos, the anguish and the confusion that the experiences had left him with, like him lying under a tank and wetting his pants. The report is vivid, at a distance from himself and from others. But what followed was a moral storm that centred around two topics: First, he told us too late! We would have had a right to know it sooner! Because he said it so late, it must also contain a much worse moral failure than we thought so far! Second, whoever was with the SS will remain a Nazi forever.

The slide of the SS perpetrator was practically projected on the image of the Democrat, who from now on lost all rights to the role of the "moral authority" ascribed to him in Germany.

That a writer of bizarre, emotional depths of stirring novels is elevated to the "moral authority" solely because he is famous and is politically outspoken, belongs in this context.

Grass did not claim that he never shot anyone, but that he did service as a gun loader. But it was as if he had hoisted a red flag at an early point in his biography and had drawn a white circle, the landing pad for a variety of helicopters with moral cargo. If it did not hurt the writer in the long run - it was definitely not due to a lack of moral noise and punitive energy from his moral judges.

The then president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Charlotte Knobloch, was convinced that the "late confession" was a public relations trick to promote the sale of his new book. The journalist and Hitler biographer Joachim Fest, highly controversial in circles of historians because of his uncritical attitude towards Hitler's Armaments Minister Albert Speer, "did not understand at all how Grass could have made for the nation's bad conscience for 60 years without confessing that he was deeply involved."

The Polish politician Lech Walesa said that the honorary citizenship of the city of Gdansk must be taken from Grass. Several politicians from the ranks of the Christian Democrats (Wolfgang Börnsen and Philipp Mißfelder) asked Grass to return the Nobel Prize for Literature, as if this award would be awarded for politically correct behaviour.

Several morale helicopters, staffed by journalists, landed at the Swedish Nobel Foundation and asked if Grass should not be denied the price or forced to return it. Foundation Director Michael Sohlman referred to the Nobel Statutes. The price has never been withdrawn.

It are not actions, not even sentiments, but symbols and ambiguous affiliations that are being judged. With these early affiliations and their surrounding symbols, the morally assailed are expected to deal with in a very particular way, and the more the 'judge' becomes convinced of his superiority, the more defiantly he states it as deficient.

A second, current example.

Two Hollywood personalities, Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey in 2017 were not only in the focus of gossip for sexual assault, but also in the focus of the prosecutor. If such perpetrators are brought to trial and lose the power to abuse their power after a verdict, that is only to be welcomed. If, on the other hand, the suspicion is sufficient to destroy careers, it is less acceptable. It tastes like 'lynch justice' as soon as media evidence is sufficient to prove reprehensible behaviour and to impose sanctions.

The scene becomes completely irrational when Spacey is demanded to be "stripped off" his two Oscars. It may be logical to take the gold medal from the winner that is convicted of doping. But has an artist betrayed the jury by failing morally?

Such distortions have a history. They argue that in the media society idols are created as well as demons. The audience does not see the stars realistically. They are idealized. So they are attributed a kind of omnipotence, a completely perfect character. If they deviate from this ideal, idealizations do not give their place to the sober judgment about merits and mistakes, strengths and weaknesses. It is much more dramatic. With one incident everything is bad.

The worshipers are now ashamed of their own worship. They turn it into its opposite, eradicate the experienced flaws of their judgment by denying the once-inflated figure all the advantages and preferring to pretend that their prize-worthy achievements have never existed and also do as if one had never really adored them previously.

When we think this drama to the end, we end up with a one-dimensional picture of art. It has to submit to moral criteria, it must not have its own laws. Anyone who became a member of the Waffen-SS at the age of 17 and has kept silent about it will not write a prize-worthy piece of literature, and if we thought for a while that he could have done so, then he would have to return the prize because he was cheating on us. If an actor hits young men on the genitals, he cannot be a good actor, and if we thought him to be, we'll take that back now.

Such an approach does not cling to historical objections. Otherwise it would be noticeable how little moral arrogance and artistic creativity can be reconciled. Contemporary documents suggest that Benvenuto Cellini was a murderer and Leonardo da Vinci was paedophile. In a reflected and ironic manner Thomas Mann has shown us the subterranean affinity of moral failure and artistic achievement; from *Tristan* to *Death in Venice* and *Doctor Faustus*, this theme runs through his works.

We know it all too well, if we ever want to know anything about such dimensions: people are always seducible at all times and not at all protected from evil deeds by talent and fame. One may wonder why it has become so difficult to visualize this at the present time. Perhaps in the face of the complexity of networked societies, the need for the thoroughly good hero grows.

It is difficult for us to bear that, after a disappointment, we cannot delete to have once loved and adored this person. This offends and robs us of the confidence to have the world under control. Those who deal with people who have been hurt by a love affair frequently observe how all memories are erased or repainted that could indicate that a now despised person was once treasured and admired.

This reaction is not only immature, it is also dangerous. It reduces experience to irreconcilable poles. The next wave of embellishment and denial is already rooted in the fantasy of a total exclusion of the undesirable and the incorrect. Anyone who has been disappointed by a celebrated, uplifted idol is usually not modest and critical, no, he seeks an even higher ideal even less anchored in reality.

In the shit-storm, in the moral lynching through public prejudice everything has to go fast. We lose the central quality of good art and good politics: the patient exercise, ultimately the joy of practicing, far from the pursuit of quick success.

Anyone who, as an artist, has the patience and perseverance to achieve greatness deserves respect. Not worship, not blind worship, not submission as soon as he abuses his power. Good art is not possible without criticism of the narcissistic fantasy of infallibility. Those who overestimate themselves do not have the patience to learn their skills self-critically.

Without narcissistic grandiosity we lack the courage for self-realization and creative action. The fantasy of self-will and irresistibility inspires man - and it puts him in danger. The line between healthy and pathological narcissism is not easy to find nor is the line between flattering subservience and critical goodwill. The derailment of the stars in Hollywood is personal pathology and failure of civil society all in one. When stars are put into a narcissistic bubble where they only hear how irresistible they are every day, they end up becoming obnoxious.

The stars of ancient Rome were generals honoured by the Senate with a triumphal procession. This ritual included not only the parade of the legionaries and the procession of prisoners, but also a slave standing behind the laurel-crowned victor, saying only one sentence: Remember that you are mortal!

We will not find such reservations at any Oskar awards, nor will we have any idea of the subsequent withdrawal of triumphant moves in the Roman Senate. The more the media society stimulates human narcissism and floats up figures such as Berlusconi and Trump, the more it becomes clear how endangered we are of stepping back from the patient and constructive way of dealing with human prowess and ambition. Blind worship of heroes and reckless devaluation of the fallen star distract from the fact that the world is too complex for quick fixes, however much we crave them. A moral narcissism, which rages in the devaluation of the once celebrated, is the very opposite of a morality that makes our society more sustainable.

It is not entirely correct to speak of an emotionalization in politics and economics, which is expressed, for example, in the large number of floating voters. Emotions play a role in all thinking, also in thorough and correspondingly slow emotions. Dangerous are the fast, the radical judgments, the bold statements about right and wrong, the 'Haudraufreden', with which we want to make us think that it is possible to liberate ourselves once and for all from the all-too-human.

We are in a narcissistic vicious circle. The more the decision makers in public life fight for attention through hyperactivity and cut off one another's speech, the less interested the citizens are in what they experience as their tiny and meaningless possibilities for democratic participation.

The development of the event culture since the end of the Cold War fulfils defensive functions that could not be discussed in classical psychoanalytic cultural criticism. Freud imagined technical "prostheses" such as the railroad, the plane, the telephone. But emotional prostheses, as supplied by the cultural industry, have developed into their present-day dominance of experience only after the death of Freud.

If we think ahead of Freud's image of the "god of the prosthesis", we come to the event as a commodity and the commodity as an event. The development has taken two directions: in the software of the cultural industry, the soaps, the media events, which - like Star Wars - shape the most diverse worlds of goods from toys to Halloween masks and thus create the Gesamtkunstwerk Event.

The second direction concerns the prostheses themselves. Today they are much more than prostheses, they are a second life. Consumer goods tend to make people their appendix, a problem factor that is too slow for motorists to master the power of their motor and the intelligence of their board computer, a screen worker too limited to grasp the technical depths of his system, a mobile phone owner blind like a mole on paved corridors through the variety and wealth of features and apps.

The person of a "leader", who Freud interpreted as an antidepressant and a tool of manic equalization of the human mass, dissolves in the event culture. It is replaced by individual commodity events or event commodities, which are much more powerful and influential, but more difficult to predict in terms of their influence. The new professional class of the media consultant lives from that, without which many CEOs and politicians can no longer imagine their activities. These advisors make sure that today's "leaders" stylize themselves into a chain of events and thus maintain their popularity.

It is not the people who shape the events, the events pull the powerful into their dynamic, flush them up or devour them, like ex-President Christian Wulff. Media, media designers and media-dominating figures interlock like gears. It is no longer clear who is moving what and when.

If we identify the event culture as a servant of a manic defense - what is being repelled?

1. Meaninglessness

The traditional answers to this question have been dealt with by believing in a Creator. But the question of meaning is still emotionally charged by many people. It is partly based on an extrapolation, which is possible for man through his reflexive mind. Much of what I do happens with the intention of achieving a goal. Since the whole of my experience must be purposeful, meaningful!

Freud has rejected the question of whether human life makes sense as inadmissible - after all, no one asks what the meaning of the animals' life is. Religion no longer carries many people emotionally, it protects little from feelings of futility. The event has the virtue that it replaces the lack of this long-term meaning of life with intensity. As long as I participate in the event, the question of meaning dissolves.

2. Uncertainty of value

Dominant staging of the event culture revolve around competitions. Whoever wins proves his value. Competitions are staged and inflated in the event world: not one (pseudo) expert rates beginners who want to become something; "Germany seeks the superstar". The audience can sit down by hand clapping or phone calls in the role of the jury, determine winners and inferiors. Who evaluates others protects themselves from their own fears of worthlessness.

3. Exhibitionistic frustration

The leading culture of the 19th century came from England and emphasized the virtues of understatement, with a flavour of Protestant-Puritan style. In Prussia this was called "Mehr Sein als Schein" or "rather being than pretending". One of the first who broke this taboo was boxer Cassius Clay. His slogan "I'm the Biggest" secured attention and vicious criticism in one. The malice has fallen silent, the attention remained, the boxer became the model of the event-oriented athlete.

The number of those who chase after glory always exceeds the number of those who actually come to it. One proof is the many copies produced by every real and even virtual character who has won the coveted glory: Elvis Presley or Marilyn Monroe, Harry Potter or Luke Skywalker.

4. Confusion

In globalized societies, confusion dominates and with it the fears of being mistaken in complex contexts, being deceived, making mistakes. The event culture offers substitute gratification, which averts these fears by promising "insight" and "control" over the current event.

Most tabloid headlines create "human" events that anyone can understand and rate. Typical of the event culture is that no mass media will do without the event. So it wins its inescapable quality.

5. Monotony

The event repels the monotony caused by labour-conditions that demands the same thing time and again. Events rooted in the course of the year are enhanced into events: the Christmas market, the New Year's Eve fireworks, the Carnival. New customs are imported, e.g. Halloween.

When my oldest graduated from high school in 1987, we sat in street clothes in the gym at tables, there were pretzels and beer, the school orchestra played, the diplomas were handed out informally. When my youngest graduated in 2002, she wore a cut-out black dress, an event location was rented, it cost admission, there was champagne, the distribution of diplomas was accompanied by dramatic music and enriched by an Oscar-winning performance, in each case three Candidates for

titles such as "the cutest mouse" or "the girl with the darkest dark circles" were nominated and then the winner was proclaimed.

6. Fear

An essential quality of the event is that it awakens the same feelings in many participants and therefore frees them from fantasies of loneliness and isolation. The event is totalitarian and fleeting at the same time: totalitarian, because it claims all the senses, fleeting because it soon has to leave its place to the next event and, as it were, wears itself off through its own over-presence. So the event takes the place of the idealized leader who welds the masses together.

The analysis of the event culture shows how deeply the drives for helicopter morality are rooted in globalized complexity. The old motto of live and let live is under pressure and everyone has to worry about a single event, whose culmination becomes the symbol of the whole, where victories are still possible or at least a struggle for victory can lead to a provisional draw.

The helicopter morale offers relieve on short notice and burdens on the long run, because a lot of energy is wasted on denials. It rises above the compromise, the search for the lesser evil, the tolerance for contradictions and the readiness to forgive that which cannot be undone.

In the experience of the child the image of mother is divided in two in an early stage: there is the good, approaching, confirming mother, and the evil, avaricious, punitive one. Accordingly there are two parts and perception of the world: there is right and wrong, "Goldmarie und Pechmarie", idyll and shudder.

Similar to fascism and religious fundamentalism, helicopter morality also fits into a series of phenomena that open up something like the dialectic of modernity: the more complex the world experience, the more numerous the life alternatives, the more difficult the orientation in economics and politics, the greater the longing for simple solutions, analogue to 'the tax law on a beer mat' and Sharia law.

The abolition of the tragedy

The suicide attacks on the World Trade Center have shaken the civilized world. It is reminiscent of motifs of ancient tragedies that the attempt to counter such dangers led to a new tragedy on March 24, 2015. The secure door, which can only be cleared from the inside, allowed a sick co-pilot to crash deadly on a cliff face. The helpless pilot could do nothing.

Those who studied the comments in the excited days after the first suspicion, discovered typical patterns of helicopter morality: Absolute incomprehension, sentimentality about the riddles of the soul, indictment against the cruelty of a perpetrator who - instead of killing himself at an angle alone – takes a hundred and fifty innocents with him into death. On the Pegida website, commentators proclaimed the conviction that the perpetrator was either crazy or an Islamic convert, followed by sarcastic approval: that does not make any difference, being one and the same anyway.

In hardly any profession, with the possible exception of the surgeons, psychological problems and dangers to the working ability, such as the use of psychotropic drugs or alcohol, are denied as energetically as among pilots. Flying is a dream for humans. Those who can fulfil their job professionally tend to consolidate a professional attitude towards narcissistic temptations. But the balance is precarious. Although it is usually possible to transform the childhood dream of flying into a professional role, this transformation is neither easy nor stable.

The pilot feels one with his plane on an emotional level. He has experienced how his profession enhances him. All the worse for narcissistic needy people is the fantasy of being a loser. The fear of airworthiness can stage a fateful fantasy of cold revenge on one's own ego and on its prostheses. As banal as it sounds, the cruel consequences are: the 27-year-old co-pilot probably only thought of himself in the last five minutes of his life.

Our modernity has lost the tragedy. The tragic event that nobody can foresee and prevent does not awaken awe, grief, and the sense of having escaped. It awakens the hectic search for a mistake and for a culprit. If we find the culprit, punish him, take him out energetically enough - "lock him up, and forever!" - we can consolidate the delusion that there is a world liberated from tragedy.

The depressive pilot who programs the fatal flight is a tragic figure, an absolute loner and individual offender, who not only sacrifices himself to his grandiose dream, but turns his duty to bring the passengers entrusted to him safely to their destination into murderous opposite. But immediately there is a call to investigate all pilots for depression and for that to lift the medical secrecy.

The point is that in an attempt to block the terrorists, the pilot gains more power than he can handle. This also applies in detail in politics: the terrorism defence has cost the lives of far more innocents since the attack on the Twin Towers than the attack itself.

Kant has developed the beautiful metaphor of crooked wood against simple moral solutions: from crooked wood nothing straight can be made. That was the idea of a preindustrial world; Kant's thorough thinking with its few principles is a counter model to the helicopter moral of today. But the conditions have changed extremely. Kant's metaphor has a solid, handcrafted quality. He has watched the shipbuilders in Königsberg. They harvested the wood in oak forests, where trees were forced to grow crooked to extract frames for the hull of a ship.

Since the world of things has expanded and changed at a breath-taking pace, we have lost the manual handling of moral issues (and, ultimately, human resilience). We are not prosthetic gods, but prosthesis slaves; The prostheses are not only stronger but above all faster than us, so we cannot keep up with them anymore. And when we try, our judgments become hasty and our countermeasures do more harm than the tragic event itself.

In this case the narcissistic motivation behind the helicopter morality is particularly clear. By denying the tragic quality of human life, moral excitement is hypertrophied into hectic demands on "responsible persons." Anyone who stumbles on the way and breaks his ankle, no longer thinks about his bad luck or his clumsiness, but looks for a guilty party, from which he can sue for compensation for his damage.

There is no joint mourning over the shadow thrown by man's hubris and in which so many dangers thrive – one rather searches for rules and constructions that eliminate this danger and thus create new dangers.

The helicopter moral corresponds to a phenomenon that is called Hindsight in the Anglo-Saxon language area, symmetrical to foresight, which also exists in German.

Anyone who lectures on Hindsight is suspected of cheap intellectual triumph. Nevertheless, this argument is highly popular in helicopter morals. It promotes ways of thinking that consumers can barely get enough of: evidence of their own intellectual superiority over those responsible who have made a mistake and now look stupid - anyone could have seen that it would not turn out as planned!

The symposium of narcissistic triumphs, to which know-it alls and the media invite, has its price. It does not make participants more mature to triumph over the immaturity of others, it makes one more anxious, more dependent. More rules, more control and stricter laws should prevent a disaster from repeating itself. As if it was a lack of moral rhetoric and trumpeted values that makes states and revolutions fail.

The helicopter moral promises that we could feel superior at any time and steer into a better future. But the truth moves in the opposite direction. The more moral arrogance and placatory overreaction, the more the evil will grow. Because the proclaimed countermeasures are based not on the insight into the own share of the helicopter morality or into the tragic qualities of the situation, but on their denial.