

»Hulapalu, What Is It All About?«

Embodied Performativity in the Relationship between Popular Music and Populism in Austria

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Abstract: Our chapter highlights the complex interplay of music and politics, with a focus on the socio-material assemblages of situated musical practice. For our Austrian case study, we discuss the song “Hulapalu” by singer Andreas Gabalier (2015a) and its role in election campaign events of the far-right populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). We will show why this song works in these settings quite well by analyzing and stressing the musical affordances the song makes. We argue that in order to understand the political potential of Gabalier’s music, however, we have also to acknowledge how his public persona is ultimately overshadowed by his embodied persona arising from the musical performance, with an emphasis on the image of “nature” that is useful as a setting for political topics. Finally, we show how the FPÖ’s campaign events benefit from the cheerful and seemingly inclusive disinhibition of the beer tent as a central election campaign venue for far-right populist actors.

1. Introduction¹

In Austria, where at the beginning of our research the far-right populist party FPÖ was part of the government, things often seem to be perfectly clear in media and scholarly discourse concerning the relation of far-right populism² and

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 - 2 Our theoretical understanding of populism follows Benjamin Moffitt’s (2016) discursive-performative approach, where populism is understood as a political

popular music. Usually, the focus of criticism lies on well-known pop stars such as Andreas Gabalier, who is said to spread political messages or conspiracy theories through public appearances, music videos, lyrics, or postings on instant messengers and social media. Publications on the topic frequently address visual aspects, analysing the imagery of record covers or music videos for their symbolism (cf. Balzer 2019, De Cillia et al. 2020). Whenever music is addressed, such writings tend to focus on a few selected songs with lyrics that fit well with established theories or judgments.

Thus, our chapter addresses the necessity to highlight the connection between popular music and populism as musical practice (Blaukopf 1984). In socio-material assemblages (Born 2011), meanings do not merely emerge through distinct messages but through the embodiment of populist tropes. These are afforded (DeNora 2003) by music and its “material arrangements” (Schatzki 2002). Taking all this into account, we get a clearer understanding of the complex and ambivalent interplay between music and politics in Austria.

2. Methodology

Our research follows a three-stage methodological strategy. The 2019 starting point for our *ethnographic* work in Austria was the public election campaign events of the far-right populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) (cf. Pelinka 2005, Mudde 2019). The characteristic use of music at its events stands out in Austrian party politics, both in terms of its longevity throughout the past 30 years and its mode of practice. Here, the FPÖ usually features a live band performing a longer set of cover versions of folk-like schlager, rock, and country music songs before and in between the speeches of politicians and during the events' finales. On that basis, we continued our field research as we visited public events where the same or similar music was played, such as party tent festivals, funfairs, and relevant concerts. In this sense, we followed the songs as the central actors of our research (cf. Latour 2005).

During subsequent group analysis sessions (cf. Doebling et al. 2019, Appen et al. 2015) with three to four colleagues who came from our university workplace but not from this specific research context, we have analysed selected songs from our fieldwork. Instead of being a “quest for one ‘correct’, ‘inherent meaning’ of an ‘art’ object”, we see our analyses as a “practice of [a group of listeners engaging] with popular music in a historically and biographically specific

style that is being reproduced through its performative aspects. This approach is differentiated from an understanding of populism as an ideology.

way” (Doebling and Ginkel 2019). Regardless of the intentions of the music makers, during our joint working process we have identified relevant affordances that make music connectable to right-wing populist issues and agendas.

The third, additional step of our methodological approach takes us from these musical analyses back into the field, which establishes a reflexive moment in our research strategy as we use the field as a critical corrective. We have conducted qualitative group interviews with music listeners living in Austria, who discuss selected songs from our fieldwork in an open conversation with only few thematic guidelines. This step of our work highlights the role of musical meaning as something that is socially produced and negotiated.

3. Case Study: “Hulapalu”

In the summer of 2019, we attended the FPÖ’s last campaign event for the European parliament elections at Viktor-Adler-Markt in the 10th district of Vienna, a marketplace in a quarter that is traditionally considered working-class and for some time has also been heavily populated and shaped by migrants from a wide variety of ethnic and social backgrounds. Back then, we recorded the following observations on site: The music is played by Carinthian cover band John Otti Band, which has established itself as the FPÖ’s house band since the 1990s. The atmosphere in front of the stage on the market grounds is lively, as visitors (about 300 in total) are dancing, singing along and waving their arms. People are drinking beer served by the FPÖ or eating snacks, heavy on meat, from one of the surrounding market stalls. It is in these surroundings that we first come upon “Hulapalu” by Austrian pop star Andreas Gabalier (2015a) during our fieldwork, a song that was popular and widely known in the German-speaking countries at that time and continues to be.

In the following, we present impressions from field research and group analyses in a mixed mode. This corresponds to our interpretative approach, which integrates different types of data in the sense of grounded theory.

3.1 Questioning the Public Persona

In a way, it is not surprising to us that we encounter a song by Gabalier at a FPÖ rally. Gabalier’s public persona has become a political issue time and again. He made anti-homosexual statements (cf. Vienna.at 2015) and defended FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache against media “agitation” (“Hetze”, cf. *Heute* 2015), only to present himself, when confronted with such issues, as a victim of misinterpretation by left-liberal media (cf. Fluch 2020).

During our research, “Hulapalu” itself became the subject of political discussion when a local cover band performed the song at a Labour Day event of the Social Democrats (SPÖ) on May 1st in Graz. A local SPÖ politician took to the stage to actively interrupt the band and reminded them of a supposed agreement not to perform any music by Gabalier (cf. *Kurier* 2019). The song, it appears, is not acceptable for the Social Democrats – but apparently it is for the FPÖ: the song offered the FPÖ the opportunity to present itself as ‘truly’ tolerant.

The academic literature and journalistic texts on music and populism have rarely occupied themselves with Gabalier’s biggest hits and instead focused on album tracks as, for example, “A Meinung haben” (Gabalier 2015b). But why? Could it be that writers tend to mistrust the popular, thereby ignoring the choices of thousands of Gabalier’s fans and rendering them invisible? Or has it been because a presumed populist ‘message’ is not easy enough to pin down in these best-selling songs? As we have written elsewhere (cf. Doebling and Ginkel 2022), this is too simple a picture of musical communication. Finally, it could also be the case that Gabalier’s biggest hits are deemed negligible in light of his assumed political convictions that ‘rub off’ on them in a way not further elaborated and, after all, can be detected elsewhere (i.e. videos or record covers as mentioned above), more pointedly.

To be clear: speculations about Gabalier’s, or put correctly, his public persona’s political convictions will not get us anywhere in terms of understanding his music’s political potential, so we will not get involved in them. This public guessing game is a consequence of the persistent myth of the original ‘true person’ which is said to hide ‘behind’ the music. However, it falls short, as music creates meaning performatively in the here and now (cf. Frith 1996, 270). Thus, we need to address “Hulapalu” both in terms of its *sound and structure* – in our group analysis we examine Gabalier’s original studio recording – and its *performative contexts and reception*. The following section is based on a triangulation of different types of data (Flick 2018) from ethnography, group analysis, and group interviews.

3.2 Introducing the Embodied Persona

Gabalier’s music, which has risen to prominence since his first hit “I sing a Liad für di” (Gabalier 2010), has often been classified as folk-like schlager. The singer, however, brands it as “Volks-Rock’n’Roll” (the people’s rock’n’roll). By modernizing the schlager genre through the rock’n’roll allusion and articulating it with the musical worlds of schlager and folk music through the prefixed “Volks-”, which could refer to either a national community or the broad mass in the sense

of a mainstream, he thus has created a genre of his own that is occupied only by himself. “Volks-Rock’n’Roll” as a genre affords the constitution of “the people” (Laclau 2005, 73), as we observed at Gabalier’s concerts in 2019. There, most of his fans wear pseudo-traditional Austrian clothing (just like Gabalier himself who has introduced his own collection of Austrian garbs) and, as rock’n’roll fans in the field of folk-like schlager, they may feel nostalgic and modern at the same time.

“Hulapalu” is a three-minute moderately up-tempo song (125 bpm), written solely by Gabalier. It features a danceable four-to-the-floor beat for which electronic and acoustic drums have been layered, a prominent acoustic guitar, and synthesizers reminiscent of contemporary electronic dance music. The sound design implies neither rock nor folk music. Instead, it reminds us of the stylistic mixture characteristic of folk-like schlager. Our point of interest in the chosen example is that, analytically speaking, this very successful song ‘in itself’ does not seem to have much to offer at a first glance in terms of politics and populism. So, what is it all about?

During our analysis, we refer to the song’s intro, which can also be characterized as the first chorus, as the “yodelling part”, placing it within the genre of folk-like schlager. According to our participants, it is the sound of changing mid and close vowels (with the tongue moving between back and front of the mouth) in the initially static and then triadic melody that creates the association of yodelling, supported by the sound design that makes it sound as if it was sung in wide open spaces, like the mountains. Yet, Gabalier’s “Hodiodioooodiooodeeee” is much too slow to pass for actual yodelling (let alone his vocal technique). Actually, it also reminds us of a stadium singalong. This, however, is not a flaw – on the contrary: it sets the barrier low for active participation, as the slowness allows many to “yodel along” who have not mastered the actual technique of yodelling.

“Hulapalu” consists of a memorable and in popular music well-known four-bar harmonic loop (A minor / F major/ C major/ G major). Hence the musical form is not established by harmonic variation, but by melodic means and, even more, through a strong and distinctive sound design, for example, closing or opening filters that mark the transition into the next part. Right at the beginning, the sound we hear is described by one participant of our group as “vast” or “incredibly far-away” (“unheimlich weit”), as when you are standing on top of the mountains. This effect of situating the listener during the first three seconds of the song is achieved by the heavy use of reverb.

The protagonist's ongoing questioning – “Was ist denn Hulapalu / Was g'hert denn da dazu?” (“What is Hulapalu / What is it all about?”³) – creates a sense of interest and fascination that follows the principle of advertising. A word that we have not even known before (Hulapalu is in fact a neologism) suddenly catches our attention, wanting to be pleasurably explored⁴, sung, and danced along to – at “40 degrees [Celsius] on the dance floor” (“40 Grad am Dancefloor”), i.e. in a crowded room full of people moved by music, where things get heated up.

Thus, the song provides us with verbal *and* sonic clues concerning the places where it positions us as listeners and where one may find it in the field: during our analysis, we imagine ourselves in beer tents, or at après-skiing parties, i.e. music venues that we associate with both the song's far-away sound and the folk-like schlager genre. These are all social places, connected to an Alpine area, where we can observe a certain sense of disinhibition (cf. Doehring and Ginkel 2022, 2023). In a group interview, Barbara, a professional singer in her mid-30s, tells us about a friend from the United States who visited the Oktoberfest in Munich and reported how excited he was about “Hulapalu” because he found it to be an amazing song to sing along to.

Irrespective of the language barrier, the song affords participation in certain spaces. In this sense, we do not hear an exclusionary song here, as one could expect from a far-right populist singer. On the contrary, at the singer's concert at Vienna's Ernst Happel Stadium (capacity for 50,000 visitors) in August 2019, we encounter numerous families, from grandparents to schoolchildren, who are all having a good time. In our group analysis, we explain this by means of the onomatopoeic playfulness of ‘yodelling’, the integrative guessing game, and the “Me and you...” lines from the lyrics, which seem suggestive but also remind us of an old children's song. In case of doubt, the lyrics retain an innocent tone, not least because one of the more suggestive lines (“I und du, und nur der Mond schaut zu” [“me and you, only the moon watching us two”]) quotes the famous German lullaby “La Le Lu (Nur der Mann im Mond schaut zu)”, which achieved lasting fame in 1955 through the rendition of actor Heinz Rühmann in the movie *Wenn der Vater mit dem Sohne*, where he sings it to his son, played by Oliver Grimm. In the early 1990s, the song was re-released in a contemporary dancefloor version by Cinematic. feat. Heinz Rühmann & Oliver

3 Our own translation.

4 Gabalier himself has fun asking passers-by for Cologne tabloid *Express* what ‘Hulapalu’ could mean. The answers are varied: it could be an oriental neck massage, or a word for animating children to sing along; a sexual meaning is also attributed to the word. Adhering to pop's golden rule, Gabalier ultimately leaves the ‘true’ meaning open (*Express* 2017).

Grimm (1993) as “Unser Lied (La Le Lu)”, which became a Top 10 hit in Austria, when Gabalier, born in 1984, was a kid. In June 2018, Gabalier performed “Hulapalu” on the popular TV show ZDF *Fernsehgarten* together with a children’s dance group.

Despite this wide appeal of representing mostly unsuspecting ‘family entertainment’, Gabalier’s public persona still concerns his audience. After a Gabalier concert at a stadium in Vienna, we witnessed a conversation on the underground train between two concertgoers. A woman in her late thirties, dressed in a Dirndl, who had come all the way from Germany with her husband and kids, starts a conversation with a local in his fifties. She asks the man something that seems to be bothering her: “So, is Andi a right-winger or not?” (“Und, ist der Andi nun rechts oder nicht?”). The man does not hesitate to reply: “No, he’s just a nature boy!” (“Naa, der is a Naturbursche!”).

This field episode beautifully represents how his audiences navigate the potentially problematic political public persona of Gabalier by referencing nature as a supposedly apolitical sphere. This comparison, however, is by no means arbitrary, as it is based upon the exposure to sound. We argue that by means of his musical performance, Gabalier’s public persona is being overruled by the *embodied* persona (cf. Moore 2005). The latter thus becomes our central research subject, not the public persona. The embodied persona is yielded in the musical performance by the specificity of Gabalier’s voice as part of his both physical and imagined body, as well as the personic environment (Moore 2012, 186), in other words: the music as it is heard and understood, co-producing the persona and itself being co-produced by the persona. We hear the “nature boy” persona in Gabalier’s singing. We also hear a singer who is serious, experienced in life, and authentic, as his voice conveys to us with full physical effort. By means of Philip Tagg’s (2013, 254) *hypothetical substitution* we may sense how specific this persona is; imagine “Hulapalu” being sung by someone else, such as Harry Styles or Prince. Even if they were dressed in pseudo-traditional costumes (the mind boggles), we would be dealing with a completely different song and attributions of the ‘nature boy’ would not work. In that case, the song would not be attractive for the FPÖ.

The persona that appears in the moment of performance and reception (as opposed to a public persona based mainly on image and media discourse) is highly relevant here, as it matches expectations from the field. It embodies and mirrors values, body and gender ideals⁵, or the praise of the rural way of life.

5 Gabalier’s songs often have a nostalgic thread of the ‘good old times’, its customs and food (cf. Botsch 2020). The singer’s embodied persona says something about strong men and affords ideas of heteronormativity; however, it is also possible

This has been the case at FPÖ rallies, such as the one we visited on Graz's main square in autumn 2021, where the John Otti Band relied heavily, more than in any other song from their set, on a loud playback from "Hulapalu" to adequately perform the 'nature boy' persona. There, an "audiencing" (Born 2021) process occurred when the song was announced as the "anthem of Styria" by "your Andreas Gabalier": 'we' become part of 'the audience' through listening and dancing to "Hulapalu", i.e. the embodied practice of 'our' music.

4. "Hulapalu": What It Is All About

Strictly speaking, "Hulapalu" cannot be categorized as political music in the sense of having a clear political agenda, and it is sung by a singer who rejects the assumption that he is close to the Freedom Party. Still, it fits the FPÖ rally remarkably well. This is the case, as we will argue in the final section of this chapter, because it provides the right offers for this specific situation, consisting of human and non-human actors (cf. Latour 2005) that need to be specified for each analysis of a popular music performance within political contexts.

4.1 Music as a Vehicle for Populist Tropes

As we have come upon in the field, the image of the 'nature boy' is relevant to our research far beyond the Gabalier case. The rejection of politics by means of referencing nature is in fact a common trope in our sample of more than 150 songs collected at rallies and beyond (cf. Doebling and Ginkel 2022). It is related, for example, to the "mountain farmer boys", who Carinthian pop star Melissa Naschenweng (2019) sings about in her hit song "I steh auf Bergbauernbuam" ("I Like Mountain Farmer Boys"), a song we also encountered at FPÖ events. Here, the singer yearns for the confident, masculine, tractor-driving mountain farmers who 'still' know how to treat young women 'right'. Naschenweng portrays these farmers as uncorrupted by urban fashion and lifestyles, such as, for instance, driving a Porsche Cayenne, a car mostly useless in the mountains. As listeners during our group analysis of "I steh auf Bergbauernbuam", we found ourselves, again, in a musically constructed Alpine-rock reality in which indeed, to come back to Gabalier, heteronormativity prevails, mediated by traditional gender roles of active men and passive women.

to queer Gabalier's persona and, suddenly, his well-toned body in tight leather pants also affords homosexual readings. Although the latter understanding is comparatively rare, we can state that, in any case, the persona speaks to a wide range of listeners.

It is probably this aspect that prompted the Social Democrats in Graz to ban Gabalier's music as inappropriate, since, according to them, the Labour Day celebration stands for women's rights and gender equality (cf. Heute 2019). This is quite remarkable, because the lyrics of "Hulapalu" are not very supportive of this interpretation: Gabalier wrote them in the most open manner and, though in typically suggestive folk-like schlager style, they do not provide us with any clear sexist messages; not even the gender of the lyrical "you" is addressed unequivocally (cf. footnote 6).

We argue that "Hulapalu" unfolds its politicity (Doebling and Ginkel 2022), i.e. its potential to stir or impact political discourse, in a situational setting and through the embodiment of sound during the performance. It is a specific embodiment of gendered roles and bodily ideals that are both specific and open enough to be connectable to far-right populist tropes: within this event, "Hulapalu" can serve the FPÖ as a vehicle to attach such tropes to the event as, for example, 'our women' are being endangered by male refugees. In comparison, when we return to the Labour Day rally as an *ex negativo* example, we understand how important this politicity may become when, as we suggest in the following, the material setting at the SPÖ event – a cover band in a party tent situation – invites 'wrong' embodiments of the 'wrong' music.

4.2 Assemblies and Their Material Settings

According to Theodore Schatzki (2002), the "site of the social" is made up by bundles of practices and material arrangements. The latter play a compelling role at many FPÖ rallies, where beer banks are set up that force visitors into contact with their neighbours. In the mode of the beer tent (cf. Doebling and Ginkel 2023), people are aggregated, and music is an important part in this due to its flexible roles: it potentially enables or actually activates listeners to embody "Hulapalu", even if the song 'just' entertains the audience 'in the background'. We thus become part of a bigger group, we constitute the audience. Judith Butler (2016, 29), in her notes on a performative theory of assembly, explains that such fleeting moments of the assembly of people constitute unforeseen forms of political performativity. "The people" – written by Butler in inverted commas – is thus not only what is produced through words, but centrally through infrastructural conditions of enactment, for which she explicitly highlights the visual and the acoustic aspects. Here, assembly, sound, and material space are mutually dependent – and, hence, impact the politicity arising from this assemblage.

In these settings, the FPÖ appears friendly, down to earth, approachable, and close to the people. Here, inclusion is key; exclusion of groups like, for ex-

ample, migrants (typical of far-right politics) does not play the initial role in forming a sense of togetherness. Rather, a group, “the people”, is created in a positive way through popular music: a group of a “we” that is pleasant – and if we do not belong to it yet, this activating, inviting music allows us to playfully feel what it is like to belong to this “we” as the bodily participation draws us in. This “we” is distinctively Austrian and rural. In Austria, the urban-rural divide is historically strong and linked to ideas of different lifestyles (cf. Wallnöfer 2019, 65–66).

In an example from a group interview we can understand how music establishes spaces where we wish to be – or where we do not feel welcome at all. Stefan, in his mid-30s, a medical doctor by profession, tells us what he thinks of “I steh auf Bergbauernbuam”, the Naschenweng song mentioned before. Stefan came to Austria from Croatia with his parents when he was a toddler and has been living in Austrian cities ever since. He says that the song immediately triggered a feeling of opposition in him because his “roots” are somewhere else, geographically and in terms of identity. He highlights how the music appears to address a group of insiders only, based on national identity or origin. Those who feel different from this, like Stefan, are implicitly excluded. They also do not feel the need to belong.

4.3 Observation through Co-Presence in Relevant Spaces

In sum, from examples like these, we come to understand how popular music creates boundaries of inclusion via musical sound and embodied personas. In music, something can be communicated through sound and embodied personas that is ‘in between the lines’, so to speak. These affordances, then, may be amplified by a certain material setting. By means of specific popular musics, the FPÖ creates spaces where the ‘right’ people feel invited and others uninvited.

It is up to us as researchers to listen more closely (*group analysis*), to participate in relevant situations (*ethnographic fieldwork*) and address the music’s reception (*interviews*) in a way that remains open to new impressions instead of approaching the field with normative categories. This has been a challenge that we have taken up with critical self-reflexion. We are not particularly close to this music in terms of our own musical tastes, and we find the politics of these events and their social dynamics disturbing. However, it is essential to address practices based on spatial co-presence with these actors. Here in the field, we experience how the music, in combination with the material setting and its typical modes of disinhibition, creates “us” and “them”, an antagonism with populist political potential (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 5–6).

In its embodied performativity, the music here is activating and assembling in a political sense. It is derived from a specifically Austrian mainstream and has served to place the FPÖ in the political mainstream. In the right setting, the music creates the sonic environment for drastic political statements. What would be immediately exposed as right-wing extremist in a different assemblage appears far more innocuous here. In socio-spatial terms, a disinhibited mode of the beer tent is activated where “we”, insofar as we belong to this group, are amongst “us” and therefore don’t have to mince our words, so to speak. The political disinhibition is connected to the mode of cheerful, party-like disinhibition. In assemblages such as these, it does not matter what political conviction musicians like Gabalier have. It is the affordance of their situative, collectively produced, embodied personas brought forth by the sound that renders their music politically applicable and useful in far-right contexts. This affordance is what “Hulapalu” is all about.

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