

The Aesthetics of Protest in the Media of 1968 in Germany

Introductory Remarks

The protest movement in the 1960s is the first social movement in Germany, that systematically adapts its public protest to the conditions of mass media (cf. Fahlenbrach 2002, 2004). Beneath the oppositional publicity in their own journals, handbills, posters etc., the social movement of the 1960s uses systematically modern mass media as a platform to express their public protest. In doing so, the protagonists direct their protest not only towards political leaders but also towards a large public of mass media, whose attention can be used strategically as a political tool. In German mass media, on the other side, a fundamental visual turn took place at the same time – both influenced by the success of television and by the cultural change, that was mainly initiated by the protest movement (cf. Fahlenbrach 2002, 2004).

In this paper, I will outline the interaction of the visual representation of protest in the late 1960s in Germany, as it was generated both by the social movement and by mass media. My presentation follows the argument that there was a strong and paradoxical interrelation between the social movement and mass media. As a result the protest movement is exposed as an ambiguous media movement: as a revolt *against* the media and as a revolt *within* the media.

First, I will sketch the new habitual dimension of symbolic protest as it relates to the socio-cultural conflict of the 1960s, which is first of all communicated in visual forms: the visual arrangement of manifestations, happenings, and other collective and public actions as well as the individual representation of protest in forms of lifestyle like clothes, hairstyle, and other habits. Since individual forms of representation are involved in the symbolic protest, *Habitus* (sensu Pierre Bourdieu) gains a new role in the forming of a *collective identity* of the social movement and its participants (cf. Fahlenbrach 2002).

This new habitual and symbolic dimension of protest also provides to visual mass media a new dimension of visual representation (and its perception): The protest against socio-cultural values and conventions can be represented in the media as *media events* that polarize and attract the public attention. Consequently, the symbolic protest fits perfectly with the modernization of visual aesthetics in the media, which is reinforced by the competition of the media that is mainly provoked by the new power of television in the late 1960s.

1. The protest of 1968 in the context of a parallel change of media and culture

In Germany, similar to all other student movements of 1968, the protest of the students differentiates very quickly two dimensions: the political and the cultural dimension. Just as in the USA, France and other countries, the political protest of the students is directed against the international capitalism and its global and imperialistic power. But corresponding to the other movements around the world, the international scopes are also combined with special national interests and aims. In Germany the political protest is first of all focused on the conservative and authoritarian politics that barely reflect the German past of the National Socialism.

At the same time, the protest of the students has a cultural dimension, that escalates to a broad generational conflict. According to Ronald Inglehart (Inglehart 1989), this conflict is based on a cultural clash between *materialistic* and *post materialistic* values: The youth opposes against the principles and attitudes of their parents, that are highly influenced by the experience of the totalitarian system and the II. World War: i.e. the authoritarian attitudes of their parents and their search of security and prosperity. The youth provocatively fights against those *materialistic* values by demonstrating for a broad individual and social liberation. As the German sociologist Gerhard Schulze points it, they transfer the *materialistic* principles of surviving into *hedonistic* principles of self-experience (Schulze 1996).

Within this cultural struggle, *Habitus* (according to Pierre Bourdieu), lifestyle and ideologies gain a new role as resources of mobilization and protest, an importance as in no other social movement before.

As a consequence of this habitual and ideological confrontation, visual signs, symbols and emblems become main media for the collective and individual identity of the activists. Protest communication shifts more and more to the individual presentation of the activists: the expressive outfit by clothes, hairdressing, buttons etc. become fields of their symbolic opposition against the established order.

Beside, the new role of visibility in protest communication is closely connected to the new situation of mass media and their selective reception of the protest movement. It is first of all this level of the cultural protest, that the media, namely the visual media, discover as a *media event*.

Since television obtains at this time in Germany its role as a leading mass medium, visibility acquires a new significance in the public sphere. Through the massive influence of

television, the print media also begin to modernize their visual style – and even choose their contents and themes upon visual criteria.

An important example for this *visual turn* is one of the most important German print magazines until today: the *Stern* magazine. It's a weekly journal that combines societal and political information with entertainment. It used to be comparable to the American *Life* magazine at that time. An empirical study (Stark 1992) proves a widespread tendency in the journal to emotionalize its linguistic and visual style at the end of the 1960^s: There is for example an obvious augmentation of close-ups and extreme shots. The visual style of the complete design, including typography, tends to attract the attention of the viewer by emotional and spectacular images and contents.

Already those short remarks might indicate that there is a simultaneous search for new visual forms of public representation and communication at the End of the 1960^s, both pushed forward by the protest movement and by visual mass media. Under the influence of a strong competition between the mass media, their selective reception is mainly focused on the following two aspects:

- on shocking or irritating visual protest actions of the movement,
- and on the polarization of the generations, that are even radicalized by mass media.

2. Protest communication of 1968 *in* and *against* the media

Now I will sketch out the paradoxical interrelation between media and protest movement using some short examples (cf. Fahlenbrach 2002). I'll concentrate my demonstration on the most well known group of activists at this time in Germany: the *Kommune1*.



Illustration 1: The *Kommune 1*

The German media mainly personalize the students movement by referring to the *Kommune 1*. Vice versa, there is no other group within the students movement that uses mass media in such a strategic way for their instrumental and expressive aims.

The members of the *Kommune 1* belong mostly to the happening-scene that create their public protest actions in the subversive style of the *Situationists*. They refer directly to the rules that guide the public sphere, mainly the sphere of mass media, to reveal rigid positions and views in political and cultural discourses.

Beneath their public happenings and protest actions, the members of the *Kommune 1* practise their social protest by demonstrating their common way of life. They constitute the first commune in Germany that strives for a community of ‘free’ individuals, liberated from all hierarchical and rigid conventions.

One of the first spectacular actions of the *Kommune 1*, that directly puts them in the center of the public interest, happens in April 1967: The American Vice-President Hubert Humphrey is attended in Berlin and the commune has been observed preventatively by the German ‘Office for the Protection of the Constitution’. Once they register their observation, the members of the commune develop offensive plans for an assault. Observed by the police, they construct bombs and go to test them in the forest. The police follows them at this place and intervenes. But the bombs are only filled with blancmange.

Nevertheless the conservative and populist press reacts harshly: Boulevard journals as the popular *Bild Zeitung* warn on their front pages, that Maoist students had planned an attempt on the American Vice-President.

Beside this polarizing yellow press, television realizes immediately the spectacular character of the action: The regional channel in Berlin (*SFB*) invites the group to reconstruct the bombs once again in presence of a filming camera. Of course the activists accede with much pleasure.



Illustration 2: Reconstruction of the ‘bomb’ in front of the TV-camera

This example demonstrates that television soon realizes the spectacular aspects of the new subversive actions. In addition, television holds a more liberal position towards the revolting students. That might also be a consequence of the competition between television and print media, namely the Yellow press. Because the populist gossip papers are main objectives of the revolting students, their display of the obvious *disinformation* is willingly supported by television (cf. Fahlenbrach 2002, 217).

The weekly magazine *Der Stern*, I just mentioned before, also refers to this protest action in a large photo story. But they use the pretended assault of the commune to present their readers the so called ‘radical way of life’ of the activists. In the center of the linguistic and visual representation of the article stands the confrontation of the generations. This expressive polarization of the generations happens on several levels:



Illustration 3: Photo Story about the students protest, Stern 1967

In the title they write: “The bluffs of the Kurfürstendamm (main boulevard in Berlin, K.F.). Riot of 2000 students against the US politics in Vietnam. 5500 policemen stroke back.” (translation, K.F.). Thus they refer in the title to the pretended assault of the commune, melting it with the real manifestations of the students against the American Vice-President. Regarding the visual representation, the generational conflict is shown as a dramatic fight: The double-sided page shows policemen in struggle with students. On the left side they demonstrate in big close-ups the sneers of the fighters; on the right side we see the physical violence of the fight.

In contrast to this dynamical confrontation we see at the top of the left side a little photo that represents the regularity of the state order: “The German chancellor Willy Brandt welcomes the American Vice-President Hubert Humphrey” (translation, K.F.). The picture demonstrates the official concord between the two states.

The following double-sided page shows views of the living rooms of the *Kommune 1*:



Illustration 4: ‘Private’ pictures of the *Kommune 1*, *Stern* 1967

The picture shows close-ups of the students within a vivid discussion. The open round is shown in a medium shot and the angle is cut at the right side. Thus the viewer is visually integrated in the scene, and at some extent he sits at the table with the students. This visual integration is dynamically enforced by the person sitting at the right side of the photo, talking and gesticulating towards the camera. The integration of the viewer in a (pretended) private and spontaneous situation should also activate the attention of the viewer and deepen his emotional involvement. Instead of reporting about the political background of the pretended assault and the political implications of the students movement against the Vietnam-Politics of the USA, the so-called ‘radical way of life’ of the communards stands in the center of the following reportage.

I quote another headline of the article: “The angry provocateurs of Berlin preach hate against the German Republic and love within the collective in the shared flat” (translation K.F.). The authors aim to shock here their conservative readers, who are affirmed in their repulsion of youths liberal values.

Corresponding to the growing interest of the mass media for the private and intimate way of life of the communards, they transfer their protest more and more from the street to their own living rooms. While journalists come to visit them in their apartment, their self representations get a rising symbolical value.

The most famous photo of the *Kommune 1*, that was also shot for the *Stern* magazine, shows the communards in an intimate presentation but also as a provocative visual delivery of their own.



Illustration 5: ‚Intimate’ picture of the *Kommune 1*

The demonstration of the naked bodies – shown from behind – is the main code of protest in this picture. But it’s not really the exhibition of a *private* intimacy that is shown. In contrary they exhibit themselves in the pose of criminals that are controlled by the police. Accordingly they represent ironically the public treatment of the revolting students as criminals in the populist press. The photo is one of the most published pictures of the *Kommune 1*, and until today it belongs to the visual canon of the students movement in Germany.

Finally the last example demonstrates the summit of the assimilation of the *Kommune 1* in mass media at that time: the esthetical adoption of their protest codes by lifestyle magazines and youth magazines, that changed them into icons of a new hedonistic lifestyle.

Beside the *Stern* magazine, it was first of all the lifestyle-magazine *twen*, that obviously assimilated the esthetical protest codes of the communards in its own visual design. *twen* is a magazine for young people, and it is one of the first German magazines that discovers since the late 50s youth as a distinctive target group (cf. Fahlenbrach 1998, 2001, 2002, Koetzle 1997).

The communard Uschi Obermaier, a former model of the *twen* magazine, who is at that time the girl-friend of the popular activist Rainer Langhans, fits perfectly to personalize the oppositional lifestyle of the commune.



Illustration 6: Icons of the protest: Uschi Obermaier in *twen*, 1969

The title of the photo story is called “Miss commune, and her life with eight others” (translation, K.F.). The whole presentation of her is widely reduced to the visual representation of habitual protest codes that are aesthetically stylized. In the center of the portrait is a large close-up that nearly fills the entire double-sided page: three quarter of the picture is filled up with her hair. Underneath we see her mouth and her nose. On the left side we see her left hand, with a henna tattoo, that holds a cigarette. Only looking at this reduced angle, diverse symbols of protest are visible: The long messy hairdo as a primary symbol of ‘counter culture’ at this time; also the tattoo: referring on the one side to oriental spirituality, it is at the same time a symbol for creative self-realization. And last but not least the cigarette in her hand, that indicates a new hedonistic female attitude.

Conclusion

Portraits and pictures like those in the *Stern* and *twen* magazine create a public image of the communards that, at a certain point, can hardly be regulated by the activists themselves. A lot of young sympathizers of the students movement are mobilized by the powerful images that the media construct of its leaders. But most of them are barely interested in the social and political dimension of the movement. They first of all recognize a chance to escape the rigid habits of their parents.

However – it’s perhaps the biggest success of the movement, to have articulated a broad need for new attitudes and habits at this time. But since this success relies to a great extend on the representation of the protest by mass media, its consequences remain until today paradoxical.

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