

Hartmut Winkler

Agency

On agency, the concept of ‘cool’, certain impositions of the male role, ‘communication’, and the media

Since media have been converted to interactivity and require more from their recipients than just reception, since Web 2.0, keyword crowdsourcing, has been extracting content from user activities, and since social networks have been demanding that users actively maintain their networks on a daily basis, the question of what ‘*acting*’/‘*action*’ actually means – inside and outside the media – has been up for debate. One of the basic problems in the social sciences, widely and controversially discussed, the concept of action is nevertheless in many respects a mystery for cultural theory. Too deeply embedded in our everyday understanding, it seems to hide in the bright light.

Action is surrounded by a whole bundle of self-evident connotations: ‘active’ seems better than ‘passive’; to be able to act appears to be associated with control, with sovereign mastery of existence and the possibility of realizing one’s own desires; passivity with a threat that mixes external determination, social backsliding, images of couch potatoes and obesity. Work/activity lies still at the center of a Protestant ethics that permeates society across religions and denominations and even prompts managers to say that their exorbitant salaries are to be measured by the 12 to 16 hours of daily work. Work no longer appears as drudgery, as imposed, but – reinterpreted as the possession of a job – as the basis of social participation, stress as the identity card of those whose work is particularly important and/or self-determined. In leisure sports and active vacations, action subjugates hitherto excluded terrains.

The examples and the excess of the action model are certainly to be put on the account of the western/bourgeois society and the recent neoliberalism. The action model, however, is more deeply rooted, right in the structures of our syntax, which demands that a ‘subject’ ‘governs’ ‘objects’ by means of a verb, and forces everything that is said to be thought according to the action model. The Cartesian subject-object dichotomy, itself a child of the early bourgeois awakening, brings this to a head; and even a theory such as ANT, which claims to challenge the subject-object distinction, pays the price of bearing the ‘actor’, and thus action, like a burn mark in its name.

All this is not new as an observation. But cultural theory, I think, should always name the price, the dimension of the subjective crisis that the model of action inevitably brings with it, and sound out where it regularly overtakes the subjects. And this all the more because the concept of the subject itself is completely indebted to the model of action.

¹ The text was published in the German book: Riegraf, Birgit; Spreen, Dierk; Mehlmann, Sabine (eds.): Medien – Körper – Geschlecht. Diskursivierungen von Materialität. Festschrift für Hannelore Bublitz. Bielefeld: Transkript 2012, pp. 107-116
(<https://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-2084-9/medien-koerper-geschlecht/?number=978-3-8376-2084-9>,
<https://homepages.uni-paderborn.de/winkler/Winkler--Handlungsfähigkeit.pdf>).

From passive to active

Computers and the internet are changing the media landscape from ‘passive’ reception to ‘activity’ and interactivity. Doubts about this interpretation and about the concept of activity/passivity are certainly appropriate and have also been discussed in the debate about, for example, ‘interpassivity’. At the same time, there is no question that the discourse that accompanies the assertion of the computer focuses its rhetoric almost obsessively on the motive of action, with all the aforementioned evaluative connotations. The activation of the user is understood as a hope for participation, as a break with the one-to-many logic of audiovisual mass media, and as wonderfully compatible with the implicit assumptions of progress.

The shift from passive to active, however, does not affect the media alone. It is part of the larger context of the remodeling of society (and of social theory), which is connected with the concept of ‘governmentality’. Foucault, in particular, has dealt with action on the most diverse levels; first – following ethnology – by making not only documents, but also *practices* the object of his investigation; second, by not tying practices to intention and consciousness, but, on the contrary, by being interested in their opacity, i.e., in those parts that necessarily escape those who act; above all, however, by showing that power does not aim at immobilization/acquiescence, but at mobilization. Thus, in ‘The History of Sexuality’, he countered the repression hypothesis by showing that sexuality is not repressed but rather stimulated even in the times of its strictest regulation. This is the most striking example that it is not a matter of immobilizing subjects, but of activating and mobilizing them. Power and control do not consist in suppressing drive or action. On the contrary, the goal is to use drives as a *motor*, to shape them, and to make them productively useful for the purposes of power.

The concept of governmentality has by no means been fully discussed. At least in one of its dimensions, however, it stands for the thesis that power has its main resource in the activation and mobilization of subjects. Of course, this has always been true for *labor*; and likewise for military ‘mobilization’, which, as Virilio and Kittler show, is also a pattern for civil mobilization. And certainly more often than with active resistance, power has been confronted with a stubborn inertia on the part of the powerless, with indolence and tenacious forms of passive persistence.

In modernity, and this makes the thesis historically concrete, this contradiction, the tension between active and passive, increases dramatically. To the extent that social structures are detached from traditions and *mobilized*, there is a need for subjects who are willing to go along with the changes – regardless of whether they agree with them – to *bring them about* through their work, and who are also willing and able to raise themselves, as subjects, to the level of a constantly remodeled world. The tumultuous dynamics associated with modernity come into tension with the persistence of the subjects; their mobilization is supposed to solve the problem; *action* is the mode that carries change as well as self-transformation.

Small capital / petty bourgeois

The archetype of the subject capable of acting – this has also been presented many times – is the petty bourgeois. Only where the individual is economically ‘independent’, he/she appears capable of acting in a comprehensive sense. Drive (the prospect of profit), willingness to take risks (the readiness to jeopardize the capital just gained, which everyday language calls ‘*to risk the existence*’), the possibility to decide on the goals of one’s own actions, accountability/responsibility, and the prospect of personal happiness seem to unite effortlessly in the role of the ‘self-employed’.

But ‘self-employed’ means much more. Above all, the ‘self-employed’ is the one who is not dependent on others. For the small capitalist this is a complete illusion, in so far as he is actually

dependent on his customers, on his suppliers and competitors, on the state and much more. Unlike the wage-earner or the soldier, however, he is at least not subject to orders.

As a *utopia*, 'self-reliance', understood as independence, has great appeal. It brings the petty bourgeois close to his historical counterpart, the aristocrat, who, above all in 'absolutism', must answer to God alone; and even the anarchists of the present day quote the concept when they call themselves 'autonomists'.²

Fact, illusion or utopia, the ability to act seems to be essentially defined by the breaking of bonds. And thus, the basic axis is named, which I want to pursue further in the following: The more strictly the agent is bound into social, institutional, formal or informal structures, the more he/she has to plan, to think about consequences and to show 'consideration', the more restricted appears the space in which his action occurs; bonds and conditions injure the concept of action. Ideally, acting is 'free' and that means unconditionally.

Cool

The present conditions, however, as Marx, Durkheim, and above all Elias have shown, are different because the social interdependencies increase dramatically. Industrialization and modernity have cast an ever-denser network across the globe, embedding the activities of the individual in ever more contexts and placing them in a field of ever more complex interdependencies. Increasing interdependence, this is Elias's point, makes chains of action longer, the link between cause and effect more and more indirect, and actions less and less noticeable as interventions in a given situation.

However, this does not mean that action and activity lose their importance, that modernity is not still dependent on action and activity. What is required now are forms of compatible and conforming action that are adapted to the structures, that keep the business running and help to constantly rebuild and revise it, that bring about an indeterminate future in order to transform it into an all the more definite present. However, these activities can hardly fulfill an emphatic concept of action. Neither can the individual agents set the goals of their action, nor can they assume responsibility in the true sense of the word, nor can they understand themselves as the cause of action, nor can they enjoy happiness, if it occurs, as its deserved result.

In this contradiction, says Elias, lies a considerable potential for frustration for the subjects involved. Modernity expects them to carry out the conflict on the terrain of their own subjectivity and ultimately at their own expense.

In order to help themselves, the subjects resort to tried and tested means: to double-knowledge structures by insisting that *both* can be true, both the concept of action and the experience that the actual action does not fulfill it. This leads to self-doubt, which makes the contradiction a problem of the private psyche; and finally to the production of semantic substitutes, which creatively bridge the contradiction.

The most striking of such substitutes is perhaps the concept of 'cool'. Cool, probably the most prominent word in the youth language of the last 50 years, clearly stands for a double-knowledge structure: Defined as "enviable, casually cool charisma," it encompasses notions of sovereignty and effortless mastery of existence, the ability to maintain poise even in strange and surprising situations, and the 'cool head' that stands for responsiveness and sober-mindedness.

In essence, however, and this is what makes the matter so piquant, 'cool' probably means *unaffected*. Even if the etymology is not completely clear, it is certain that the word in this

² In Germany the term for the Antifa.

connotation stems from African-American subcultures. This would suggest that it – similar to the blues – by no means reflects sovereignty, i.e. the ability to act, but quite the opposite, experiences of suffering and powerlessness. To remain ‘cool’, i.e. not to react affectively and to put aside affects even where they would be more than appropriate, is a means of survival when the opponent is overpowering and resistance is futile. Indirectly, ‘cool’ refers back to the US-American trauma, to slavery.

The concept of ‘cool’, unaffected, seems uniquely apt to bring together the contradictory: an aestheticized aristocracy and the renunciation of resistance, emotion, affect; exhibited and visible sovereignty and at the same time a compromise with the circumstances; submission and composure, combined with the refusal to pay the price of psychic deformation.

My thesis is that African Americans leave to whites a semantic artwork that best captures the contradiction between action and inaction. While the pole ‘sovereignty’ connotes agency, ‘cool’ also delivers the opposite pole, submission as adaptation to circumstances.

Affect

‘Cool’ makes it clear that action has an affective core; in the impulse that compels and drives action, in the affective (or just low-foam) reaction to circumstances, to resistances that stand in the way of action, in the joyful or anxious expectation, and in the affective response to the eventual results.

But it is precisely affect that seems to be the first victim of the ‘modernization’ of action. Psychoanalytically trained, Elias also thematizes this aspect by letting – at this point quite disconcerting – a historically not exactly localized archaic ‘warrior’ exult and mourn, enjoy violence and “the uninhibited satisfaction of pleasure from women [...]”. In ‘modern’ action there is no place for such affects. Their faint echo may resound when the equity trader jumps up from the screen, fist clenched as a sign of victory, and managers indulge in metaphors of warfare (‘CEO’, ‘strategic alliance’, ‘how are we positioned?’). Here, however, the wild animal of affect has become domestic, ready to pull the plow as long as there is food. Nietzsche memorializes this when he says that the person of modernity wraps himself in the cloak of reason in order to then go his own way; and of course Nietzsche is concerned with the specific character of this ‘reason’, which is essentially committed to the reality principle. And this is exactly what the present demands of the people who act.

Gender

The old, emphatic model of action – it is almost superfluous to say this – is male connoted. And its crisis must therefore primarily affect the male role. The ability to act, the ‘lonely decision’, the ‘own way’ – all these are Western clichés, completely inappropriate, outdated, and untimely; even if the corresponding rhetoric still plays a role, for example when it comes to persuading the subjects to persevere, assertiveness *within* rather than against the existing hierarchies, or fitness in the field of carefully organized competition.

Even aggressiveness is demanded as a personality trait, as long as it is directed against pre-defined goals and benefits the apparatus as a source of strength, as a resource. Contemporary hierarchies, interactions, and road traffic are characterized by an extraordinary quota of male perpetrators who are simultaneously frustrated-aggressive and sissies, steaming posers and sheep in wolf’s clothing.

What wears down the action model, as has been said, is the interdependence of action contexts. The male role does not prime for interdependence; the network of mutual dependencies must

stand in sharp contrast to the role of men. Women seem to be better prepared for this: “Mass culture is a woman”; here, elements of the traditional gender role turn out to be surprisingly functional: orientation towards people and their complex relations, attention to the context, and – this leads back to the field of media studies – orientation towards communication.

When Luhmann rejects the concept of action and makes communication, of all things, the new basis of his sociology, this has, in view of his more than masculine type of theory rather unexpectedly, a hidden gender aspect. Communication appears as an alternative because it necessarily and always already assumes a relation and seems to be more appropriate to the networks of modernity than the concept of action tied to a ‘solitary’ subject. The ‘solitary agent’ makes no sense in the field of comprehensive communications.

Subject criticism

French philosophy, which in the seventies caused a shock wave in Germany, did not so much dismantle the philosophical concept of the subject, as draw philosophical consequences from its empirical crisis. At the center, however, is a radical critique of language and signs, and not, as one might expect, a critique of the model of action.

If the subject is bound to the model of action, however – as a grammatical subject in the architecture of syntax, in the aesthetics of genius as ‘author’, and as substitute for the creator-god, in economics as subject of labor, and in the philosophies of the subject as the only certain center, subject of reflection, reason, and cognition, from which action proceeds as a purposeful change of the world – then an equally radical critique of practices would have to be placed alongside the radical critique of signs. Foucault’s attention to practices envisages this.

In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno/Horkheimer have, among other things, provided a critique of the male perpetrator. For the commandment ‘to become practical’, to act, they have nothing but scorn, and they demonstrate that the initiative, which the individual still ascribes to himself, has long passed to the social apparatuses. Interestingly, however, they once again oppose this with a subject that then necessarily no longer determines itself through action and practice, but through its ability to differentiate itself from what exists. When Adorno formulates this in Aesthetic Theory, he splits the concept of action: Practices and aesthetic practices diverge, and only the latter have the power to distance themselves and to cause change.

Restaging

The media, it seems, have opted for a different solution on the terrain of aesthetics. They invest equally on both sides and work resolutely toward double-knowledge. In the afternoon TV series – from *Al Bundy* to *Home Improvement* – the dismantling of the male patriarchy is uncompromisingly pursued; episode after episode it is exposed that all that remains of the ability to act is a set of gestures, a kind of performance. “What happened to the strong, silent type?” the script has Anthony Soprano ask, implying that silence means action and speech weakness, the renunciation of action.

In other genres we find different solutions: Discovery Channel, for example, still shows real men snatching king crabs from the Arctic and timber from the forest. Wherever there is “*action*”, the old model of sovereignty is adored.

And likewise – modified – in the casting shows. Here, the order is given to act on one’s own, with heroic determination, against all odds and without regard for the context, for previous experience or ability, alliances or networks; and without regard for the statistics, the scant actual chance. In the fire of pure action all contradictions melt away: individuum and group feeling,

cooperation (duet!) and bitter-serious competition, coaching and evaluation/condemnation, the loving, nurturing and the cruel-strict father. And faithfully all (all!) candidates promise to '*give everything*'. Whoever gives everything has left measure, exchange, and equivalence behind and enters a Bataillean universe of unconditional exertion.

Unconditionality, however, as has been said above, is a utopia. The utopia of stepping out of the interdependencies once again and taking one's fate into one's own hands.

And exactly here emotion is injected again. After long years of socialization under the dictates of affect control, which, as Reich shows us, results in the formation of a body armor, the subjects are now required to show their feelings, and to do so as much and as 'authentically' as possible. The show value of the event lies in the fact that the clash becomes physically discernable: If white-collar bodies suddenly have to deliver 'soul', the audience *knows* that this must fail. Double knowledge, I think, is almost openly conceded here. Action is the starting point; that decision and action fail is heard as the second part of the message.

'Action' has become an ideology. Starry-eyed, wrapped in a package of self-evidence, it appears almost unquestionably as a value. But if action were what it purports to be, no one would need to be persuaded.