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"A CLEAR MESSAGE?" AESTHETIC PRACTICES OF PROTEST, ON-SITE AND ONLINE

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Abstract
This paper explores how the performance and aesthetics of contemporary protest are shaped by social media networks and audiences from a theatre and cultural studies perspective. It analyzes the tactics used by protesters during and after on-site protests to disseminate their messages and to actively influence and control the interpretations of their protest that are distributed online by others. Based on observation of three European protest events in January and February of 2019 (in London, Budapest, and Dresden) this paper presents the characteristic tactics of protesters in light of specific dynamics between on-site and online protests. It discusses the aesthetics of protest in the context of the ambiguousness of on-site protests, which is reinforced by social media.
Keywords: aesthetics of protest; aesthetic practices; performance analysis; theatrical observation; digital media
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Introduction

When the Hungarian political activist Gábor Szabó was arrested by local police on the Széchenyi chain bridge in Budapest on January 19, 2019, no more than a few hundred people were present to witness his protest. The incident attracted more attention with several livestreams of the event posted

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on Facebook. While the situation on the bridge itself was little more than an exchange of provocations between the police and a dwindling crowd, its representations in social media and the reactions of online observers made it appear more spectacular than it was on-site. In the days immediately after, Szabó started calling the incident the "battle on the chain bridge" on Facebook. Leveraging the affective affordances of social media, Szabó constructed a narrative that would have been impossible without the attention that the original, yet slightly misleading livestreamed images evoked online.

In this article, I explore from a theatre and cultural studies perspective how the performance and aesthetics of contemporary on-site protests are shaped by social media networks and audiences. I show how protesters like Gábor Szabó use social media applications during and after on-site demonstrations not only to spread their message but to influence and control the interpretations of their protests by online audiences. Based on my *theatrical observation* of three European protest events in 2019 (in London, Budapest, and Dresden), I describe, analyze, and discuss significant interplay between on-site and online protests in the context of today's digitally mediatized protest culture.[1]

I focus on three particular scenes that spotlight the relevance of social media to protesters' actions and the value of applying a performance-studies approach to what I will conceptualize as the *aesthetics of protest*. Protests in general are characterized by a tension between the protesters' desire to articulate a clear message on the one hand and an aesthetic ambiguity on the other. The transferal of protest to digitally mediatized online stages increases the importance of protesters' efforts to manage the impression they make on others. In this hybrid, on-site and online setting, a performance-studies approach helps us understand how meaning is produced by protesters' self-presentation – in the sense of Erving Goffman[2] –, by on-site and online observers, and not least of all by researchers. What is the interplay between an on-site event and the form in which it is mediated online? How do protesters grab the attention of on-site and online observers? How do they present the on-site event in their online communications? What tactics do they use online to assert and strengthen their interpretations of the on-site event and the message of their protest? And how is the presence of the researchers observing them involved in producing and shaping such hybrid protest events?

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[1] I speak of *mediatization* to refer to socio-cultural changes induced by media technologies and their use. Wherever I speak of *mediation*, I refer to the form and the distribution of something being conveyed through media.

[2] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1959).

On-site and online protests intersect in several ways. On the one hand, an on-site event serves protesters as material for presenting online their personal interpretation and framing of what they experience. In the contentious dynamic between street protests and their simultaneous digital mediation by social networks, protesters use certain tactics to highlight particular aspects of their message, to frame or reframe the event, and to reinforce what they consider to be the essential message of their protest. At the same time, social-media communications affect on-site protests in various ways. They make the protesters aware that they are being observed. They allow interaction between people who are present on-site and those who are gathered online. Even the target of a protest can shift, in the sense that sometimes the online audience becomes more important than the one on-site.

I argue that the tactics I have observed are not classifiable as clearly "offline" or "online." They are part of a performative repertoire that is characteristic for aesthetic practices of today's digitally mediatized protest culture *between* on-site and online. In the digital age, new constellations of seeing and being seen multiply and dissolve the boundaries between subject and object in public situations. The analytical challenge lies in describing the dynamics of networked communication, which seems impossible to fully capture. By observing how an online protest corresponds with the protest on-site, however, the fundamental properties of contemporary protest can be better understood.

The Aesthetics of Protest

According to cultural theorist Thomas Balistier, "protest is a form of symbolic politics."[3] By symbolic politics, Balistier means a mostly non-verbal type of political communication that "does not primarily involve analyses, arguments, and facts, but rather feelings and attitudes, as well as contexts of meaning and value judgments."[4] According to Balistier, symbolic political communication is a quasi-necessary feature of protest when the complexity of society is increasing. Symbolic communication, he argues, is an instrument for the construction of "oppositional publics." That means that protest does not simply take place at a given time or a given space, but also constructs "special and biased meanings

[3] Thomas Balistier, *Straßenprotest. Formen oppositioneller Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zwischen 1979 und 1989* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1996), 216.

[4] Ibid., 224.

of space and time in relation to the usual, i.e. the dominant ones."[5] In that way, a protest constitutes a special form of public *presence*.[6]

My primary interest is not in the cultural and political dynamics of symbolic communication, which have already been conceptualized several times.[7] Rather, I explore the notion of presence discussed by Balistier. Presence, I argue, essentially has an *aesthetic* nature. Following the philosopher Gernot Böhme, I understand aesthetics in the sense of *aesthesis,* a special mode of perception where reality is formed by the "way in which things and environments present themselves."[8] According to Böhme, aesthesis has two sides: "on the one hand, the environment, which radiates a quality of mood; on the other hand, me, in that I participate in this mood in my state of mind and in that I realize that I am here now."[9] This means that the "aesthetic" is not the "beautiful" or the "nice," but is everything attracting the researcher's attention in a situation in which he or she is involved and which becomes an object of his aesthetic, self-referential perception.

This understanding differs from other approaches to the aesthetics of protest that have moved beyond popular and Kantian understandings of aesthetics but left the role of the spectator mostly unconsidered.[10] From a performance studies perspective, attention to spectatorship is essential in order to understand how protesters direct their actions towards both present and absent audiences. It is also essential to understand how the aesthetics of protest unfold and persist between protesters and observers. In this sense, the aesthetics of a protest is not something that can be determined or described simply and objectively. It is a fundamentally ambiguous, inter-subjective, situational experience.

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[5] Ibid., 174.

[6] The terms presence and aesthetic perception in performance theory are explained below. At this point, I only refer to the terms as generally used in theatre theory. See Doris Kolesch, "Präsenz," in *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Doris Kolesch, and Matthias Warstat, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2014), 251–253.

[7] See, for instance: Ulrich Sarcinelli, "Politische Inszenierung/Symbolische Politik," in *Handwörterbuch zur politischen Kultur der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, ed. Martin Greiffenhagen, Sylvia Greiffenhagen, and Katja Neller (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2002), 370–379; Jeffrey C. Alexander and Jason L. Mast, "Introduction: Symbolic Action in Theory and Practice: The Cultural Pragmatics of Symbolic Action," in *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, and Jason L. Mast (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–28.

[8] See Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre. Essays zu einer neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013), 96.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, and Umut Korkut, *The Aesthetics of Global Protest*: *Visual Culture and Communication* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

How can presence be conceptualized in a digitally mediatized public sphere? Are the aesthetics of a protest event expanded in space and time, complicated, or even destroyed by digital recording and dissemination? Understanding protest as symbolic political communication, as Balistier does, is plausible, but it requires more in-depth discussion in the digital age. Balistier developed his concept of symbolic political communication in the historical context of the 1980s in West Germany, which was a pre-digital protest culture. Accordingly, his theory is based exclusively on written sources.[11] This is a problem because he could only access protest events "based on second-hand experiences."[12] As a result, he was unable to analyze the situational materiality of protest. Even more importantly, applying his theory to today's protest culture requires a different notion of what constitutes action.

Protest is traditionally understood as action aimed at a "deliberate, purposeful change of a given state"[13] by a subject acting strategically. To understand protest as an *aesthetic practice,* however, one must use a different logic. According to Rolf Elberfeld and Stefan Krankenhagen, "fixed norms or rationally secured intentions [do not] determine aesthetic practices, but situational resonances and sensually evoked evidence lead the actors beyond their own frameworks."[14] This means that protesters are self-reflexive actors who participate in producing a situational atmosphere that affects their performance. At the same time, the extension of their protest onto online stages results in multiple representations of it in the course of and after the on-site event.

Qualitative research of protests and movements has explored today's protest culture, which is formed by the practices of everyday, protest, and event culture as well as identity politics and aestheticized life.[15] Researching the subject from several perspectives allows us to grasp the nuances in *what protesters do* in the course of protesting. The aesthetic, performative, and expressive facets and microforms of protest have been described and analyzed, including their

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[11] Balistier, *Straßenprotest*, 18.

[12] Ibid., 20.

[13] Klaus Schubert, "Handlung," in *Lexikon der Politikwissenschaft. Theorien, Methoden, Begriffe*, ed. Dieter Nohlen and Rainer-Olaf Schultze, 4th ed., vol. 1: *A–M* (München: C.H. Beck, 2010), 351. In this sense, social movements can be considered a phenomenon of modernity, because they assume the possibility of intervening in social realities. See Dieter Rucht, "Soziale Bewegungen," in *Lexikon der Politikwissenschaft. Theorien, Methoden, Begriffe*, 1st ed., ed. Dieter Nohlen and Rainer-Olaf Schultze, vol. 2: *N–Z* (München: C. H. Beck, 2002), 853–856.

[14] Rolf Elberfeld and Stefan Krankenhagen, "Einleitung," in *Ästhetische Praxis als Gegenstand und Methode kulturwissenschaftlicher Forschung,* ed. Rolf Elberfeld and Stefan Krankenhagen (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2017), 15.

[15] Ian R. Lamond and Karl Spracklen, eds., *Protests as Events: Politics, Activism and Leisure* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

linguistic aspects,[16] visual materials,[17] media practices and media ecologies,[18] film and video works,[19] digital strategies,[20] and anthropological[21] and theatrical qualities.[22] The latter two studies show what researchers have missed, however. While Stefan Donath focuses on the importance of presence, his detailed theatrical protest theory is built on street protests mediated online that he did not attend himself. On the other hand, Jeffrey Juris' analysis of "image events" in anti-globalization protests helps us understand how protesters stage their on-site actions to attract media attention, but he is more concerned with protesters' collective behavior than their individual actions. His analysis was also developed before the rise of social media networks and the consequent multiplication of protest-related image events and the acceleration of their circulation.[23] What is missing is a perspective that connects the situational, performed materiality of on-site protest with the dynamics of its mediation and distribution via social media networks. In the following, I will first outline some elements of such a perspective and then apply it to three selected cases.

A Performance-Studies Approach to the Aesthetics of Protest

Protest and movement studies usually speak of *presence* as the joint appearance of bodies in a shared time frame. In a shared presence, so the theory goes, a movement network materializes, actualizes, and condenses, so that it appears to itself and others as a united mass.[24] The collective identity of protesters is

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16 Mark Dang-Anh, *Protest Twittern. Eine Medienlinguistische Untersuchung von Straßenprotesten* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019).

17 Nicole Doerr, Alice Mattoni, and Simon Teune, "Toward a Visual Analysis of Social Movements, Conflict, and Political Mobilization," in *Advances in the Visual Analysis of Social Movements,* vol. 35 (Wagon Lane: Emerald Books, 2013), xi–xxvi.

18 Alice Mattoni, "A Situated Understanding of Digital Technologies in Social Movements: Media Ecology and Media Practice Approaches," *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 4 (2017): 494–505, doi: 10.1080/14742837.2017.1311250.

19 Jens Eder and Chris Tedjasukmana, "Video Activism on the Social Web," in *Contemporary Radical Film Culture*, ed. Steve Presence, Mike Wayne, and Jack Newsinger (New York: Routledge, 2020), 41–52.

20 Fidèle A. Vlavo, *Performing Digital Activism: New Aesthetics and Discourses of Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

21 Jeffrey S. Juris, "Performing Politics: Image, Embodiment, and Affective Solidarity During Anti-Corporate Globalization Protests," *Ethnography* 9, no. 1 (2008): 61–97, doi: 10.1177/1466138108088949.

22 Doerr et al., "Towards a Visual Analysis," xi–xxvi.

23 Kerstin Schankweiler, *Bildproteste* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2019).

24 Dieter Rucht, "Lassen sich personale, soziale und kollektive Identität sinnvoll voneinander abgrenzen?" *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 24, no. 4 (2011): 28, doi: 10.1515/fjsb-2011-0405.

revealed and stabilized in a public appearance. Theories of protest and movements highlight the role of performative practices in the internal and external experience of building a movement identity. They "emphasize that shared ideas, culture, and goals alone ... are not sufficient, but must be put into practice in action."[25] Following the ideas of the sociologist Émile Durkheim, quasi-ritual actions in the physical presence of others are regarded as "generators of emotional energy and ultimately of collective identity."[26]

This perspective resembles performance theory. According to the theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, a performance (*Aufführung*) "takes place in and through the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. It emerges from their encounter, confrontation, interaction."[27] A performance, according to theatre scholar Jens Roselt, is an "in-between event,"[28] and a social process. Performances materialize in and between bodies interacting with each other. They are jointly performed and are singular and unrepeatable events.[29] What's more, the bodily co-presence of protesters is a performative realization of their right to appear in public despite conditions of marginalization and precarity, as the philosopher Judith Butler has said.[30]

It is worth noting the similarities between performances and protest events (which can also be understood as *cultural performances*).[31] A performance-studies approach to protests makes it possible to understand how they produce meaning, as well as the researchers' role in the process. According to Fischer-Lichte, perception of a performance oscillates between two orders. One is the order of representation, in which the perceived performance is experienced in its semiotic sense. The other is the order of presence, which focuses on "the particular appearance of people, spaces, things and sounds," on "effects that have become

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[25] Priska Daphi, "Soziale Bewegungen und kollektive Identität. Forschungsstand und Forschungslücken," *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 24, no. 4 (2011): 17, doi: 10.1515/fjsb-2011-0404.

[26] Ibid., 17.

[27] Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Die verwandelnde Kraft der Aufführung," in *Die Aufführung. Diskurs – Macht – Analyse*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte et al. (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), 11.

[28] Jens Roselt, *Phänomenologie des Theaters* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 194.

[29] Ibid., 47–51.

[30] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[31] According to ethnographer Milton Singer, cultural performances are "characterized by a clearly defined period of time, a beginning and an end, an organized program of activities, a number of actors, an audience, a place and an occasion." See Doris Bachmann-Medick, "Performative Turn," in *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2006). The question of how these elements of cultural performance exist in the digital age, however, needs to be discussed in more detail.

conscious," and on the "observable ... reactions of spectators."[32] According to Fischer-Lichte, both orders of perception constantly fade into each other during a performance. The experience takes in the supposed main event as well events that seem to be secondary. In the course of a performance, anything can become an object of perception and affect one or both orders of perception. Since the reactions of the participants can influence the perceptions and actions of observers, performances take place as "autopoietic processes that involve all participants, actors as well as spectators; accordingly, they are characterized by a high degree of contingency."[33]

Contingency means that the contents and forms articulated on banners and flags, in speeches, and in chants cannot provide information on their own about the concerns of a protest community, but that they must be read in the context in which they are used, perceived and received. Are they shouted offensively or spoken timidly? Does a controversial statement or action reap opposition or approval? Is police brutality arbitrary or a reaction to deliberate provocation? And above all, what effect do all these actions have on me as a spectator, participant, or a person otherwise involved, like a researcher? The "autopoietic ... feedback loop"[34] creates co-responsibility of all participants for the performance, often in an eruptive dynamic from which all of them derive meaning.[35] As Fischer-Lichte puts it, "If it is to be assumed in performances that all participants are involved, as they co-determine the performance and at the same time allow themselves to be determined by it, the manipulation thesis, which is widespread in the social sciences, will hardly hold up."[36] Applied to protests, this means that the participants in Germany's "PEGIDA" marches, for example, agree much more with the radical and racist content voiced onstage than the bourgeois media may want to admit.[37]

Finally, performance theory explains the researcher's position. Researchers are necessarily selective in what they perceive as significant because they

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[32] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theaterwissenschaft. Eine Einführung in die Grundlagen des Faches* (Tübingen: UTB, 2010), 81.

[33] Fischer-Lichte, "Die verwandelnde Kraft der Aufführung," 11.

[34] Fischer-Lichte, *Theaterwissenschaft*, 228.

[35] Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Performativität und Ereignis," in *Performativität und Ereignis* (München: Francke, 2003), 30.

[36] Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Einleitende Thesen zum Aufführungsbegriff," in *Kunst der Aufführung – Aufführung der Kunst* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2004), 14.

[37] Tino Heim, ed., *Pegida als Spiegel und Projektionsfläche. Wechselwirkungen und Abgrenzungen zwischen Pegida, Politik, Medien, Zivilgesellschaft und Sozialwissenschaften* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017), 11.

are "involved in the process they want to analyze but also in the subjectivity of their perception."[38] Awareness of one's position of observation is particularly necessary when dealing with contemporary protest phenomena, which causes problems for some of the researchers' established methods.[39] Analysis and interpretation should be based less on generalizations and statements by participants, but instead, as theatre scholar Matthias Warstat puts it, on "scenic ... constellations ... to understand the opening and refraction of signifiers more precisely ... [and to] enable further political differentiations at important points."[40]

Appearing Online Under Conditions of Connective Action

As we have seen from the performance perspective, on-site protest events are characterized by ambiguity and contingency. The processes of interaction and meaning-making are even more complex in digitally mediatized communication. Using social media, protesters can make their voices heard and gain visibility in different ways, in the form of their choice. Their presence on various platforms or stages simultaneously carries with it both opportunities and challenges. How can performance theory help us to understand these hybrid contemporary protests?

According to theatre scholar Ulf Otto, a performative appearance takes place when a performer draws attention to herself with certain techniques that let her "emerge as a subject from the interaction between performer and spectator."[41] According to Otto, a performative appearance results in "a process of figuration in which a character appears that is as unstable as the performance from which it emerges and that is equally dependent on the maintenance of attention."[42] Performative appearances can take place online. Otto says:

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[38] Fischer-Lichte, *Theaterwissenschaft*, 73.

[39] In on-site interviews with protesters, for instance, the interpretative schemes applied by researchers and the conclusions they draw are sometimes distorted, which affect not only the political classification of a protest phenomenon, but also the behavior of the protesters. See Simon Teune and Peter Ullrich, "Demonstrationsbefragungen. Grenzen und Potentiale einer Forschungsmethode" (2015), https://depositonce.tu-berlin.de/bitstream/11303/5258/3/teune_ullrich.pdf.

[40] Matthias Warstat, *Soziale Theatralität. Die Inszenierung der Gesellschaft* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2018), 158–159.

[41] Ulf Otto, *Internetauftritte. Eine Theatergeschichte der neuen Medien* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013), 37.

[42] Ibid., 37.

> Although ... Internet appearances are subliminally influenced by algorithms and data abstractions ... they can still be described ... as something that generates attention through the distinction between actors and audience, that emerges from everyday life as an exceptional situation and social event, and that is institutionalized in a complex of interlocking practices of acting, organizing, and receiving. They produce a character that they elevate and bring face to face with a community. This elevation gives a character a pictorial or semiotic quality, authorizes it, and at the same time forms a community that attaches meaning to it.[43]

Similar to on-site performances and protests, a performative internet appearance is determined by the reciprocal dynamics of self-presentation and collective attention and reception. The collective attention-giving of social media users enables and authorizes an actor to perform or speak. An online community that gathers to comment and react to a protester's social media post *empowers* the protester to further perform and appear as a character before the community by signaling that the message is resonating and has relevance to the community.

Social media infrastructure and features like hashtags[44] enable protesters to stage internet appearances and engage in online discourse with barely more than a smartphone. A protest event and actions performed on-site can serve as material for an internet appearance, as has been shown by research on performative citizenship on Instagram.[45] However, the boundless communication offered by the social web opens protest images up to misinterpretation, contention, and hostile distortion. As online dissemination of protest images widens, "the resonance surfaces of today's protests are expanding significantly, creating a social potential of hitherto unknown proportions."[46] The price of wider dissemination is the decontextualization of protest images, which puts protesters under increased pressure to manage the impressions they make online.

The political scientists W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg have called the underlying dynamics of online protest *the logic of connective action*. They argue that the growing ability to participate in mass protests through personalized communications is leading to a pluralization of movement discourses:

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[43] Ibid., 46.
[44] Andreas Bernard, *Theory of the Hashtag* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).
[45] Fatima Aziz, "Performing Citizenship: Freedom March Selfies by Pakistani Instagrammers," in *Selfie Citizenship* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 21–28.
[46] Donath, *Protestchöre*, 27.

> Personal action frames allow people to specify their own connection to an issue rather than adopt more demanding models regarding how to think and act. People can share their engagement and contributions in forms easily adopted by others as personal action frames that do not narrowly specify identity and that thus travel more easily beyond identity boundaries (e.g., group, ideology, geography, culture) across social networks.[47]

Bennett and Segerberg are describing personalized, bottom-up participation in collective processes that have traditionally been organized top-down.[48] They point to the expansion of participation in existing organizational forms and to a potentially unmanageable multiplicity of interconnected interpretations and identities that assemble online around an event. The participants help to produce this multiplicity through their individual actions and interpretations.

We now turn to our three cases and explore and analyze how protesters use and deal with contemporary media conditions as part of their on-site protests.

Case Analyses

The three cases analyzed in the following section were observed in January and February of 2019. They represent three different European regions, political cultures, and protest contexts. They are part of a larger sample that included seven protest events in all. I selected the three cases in this section because they represent the greatest possible diversity of contexts, ideologies (pro-European, anti-government, broadly oppositional, and far-right), and forms of information mediation (pictures, livestreams, texts). Their observed dynamics are characteristic of a broad spectrum of protest practices under conditions of digitally mediatized, networked, online communication.

This is not to say that the relevance of the three cases was obvious from the beginning. Nor were they chosen on the basis of abstract parameters. The scenes described and analyzed below were selected after several hours of attending and observing the on-site events personally. I approached these events from a perspective of *theatrical observation*, a concept originated by theatre scholar

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[47] W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 197.

[48] For a detailed and differentiated discussion of these processes see Kathrin Voss, ed., *Internet und Partizipation. Bottom-up oder Top-down? Politische Beteiligungsmöglichkeiten im Internet* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2014).

Frank Richarz. In theatrical observation, the researcher directs her attention to a social process and describes it as a complex of theatrical, embodied acts. The assumption is that the meaning of the protest event is produced jointly by all participants in an intersubjective, auto-poietic, performative process. According to Richarz, theatrical observation differs from distanced or even participant observation in that the "staging of a performance ... is to be valued as an act of full engagement."[49]

Theatrical observation does not mean that the theatre metaphor should be stressed too much (for instance, by looking for directors, dramaturgs, backstages, etc.). It is more about understanding protests as aesthetic practices and processes of making meaning and presence. In my analysis I used memory protocols to reconstruct significant scenes of protest and find connections between the on-site event and its online mediations. Starting by identifying "distinctive moments"[50] in the reconstructed event, I searched for corresponding social media material online using event-related keywords and hashtags. I then compared the online content with my experiences at the on-site protests in order to describe specific dynamics between the on-site and online experiences. I present the three cases in chronological order.

London, UK, January 12, 2019

On the afternoon of January 12, 2019, a group of anti-Brexit protesters assembled at the edge of Highbury Fields, Islington in north London. About fifty people, most of them elderly, assembled in their winter clothes carrying EU flags and signs with messages such as "don't back a bad deal!"[51] In the front row, some held a banner reading "IslingtonInEurope." At a photographer's request, they rhythmically chanted: "People's Vote! People's Vote!" They were obviously confident about their message. But whom were they addressing? The busy main street of Islington was out of sight, and the residents of the surrounding houses were nowhere to be seen. The few pedestrians who walked by were unimpressed.

The "Islington Procession," as the protest was labeled, took two routes. One half of the group was to go through the southern part of the city, the other half

[49] Frank Richarz, "Von der Aufführung zum Performativ. Die theatralogische Untersuchung machtmimetischer Prozesse," in *Die Aufführung. Diskurs – Macht – Analyse* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), 137.

[50] For the concept of distinctive moments see further Roselt, *Phänomenologie des Theaters*, 9–22.

[51] The quotes in all three of the cases in this article were recorded using each case's respective observation protocol, unless otherwise noted.

through the northern part. The two groups were to meet in central Highbury Park. The protesters' goal was to reach out to Labour voters in order to put pressure on Jeremy Corbyn and Emily Thornberry, the two Labour members of parliament for the area. The organizers of the northern march had two strategies for that. First, they asked the protesters to interact directly with pedestrians, hand them flyers, and start discussions. Second, they asked them to post photos of the event on social media using the hashtags #PeoplesVote and #IslingtonInEurope, and to tag them with Corbyn's and Thornberry's Instagram and Twitter accounts.

The on-site protest gained little attention, so the protesters used social media to reinterpret it. At 19:32 local time, almost six hours after the procession ended, the organizers sent out the following tweet:

> Did our elected representatives @jeremycorbyn @EmilyThornberry notice today's @IslingtonIn procession? 300+ people incl ALL main parties & none walked 4 miles from North to South distributing 10,000 window posters & getting a clear message on our Islingometers: a #PeoplesVote![52]

Four accompanying photos showed the protesters from different perspectives at the final rally in the park. The protesters looked into the camera, held up their signs ("I like voting," "Brexit: is it worth it?" "WE REJECT THIS BREXIT DEAL"), and waved EU flags. A banner they held in front read: "IslingtonInEurope." Nine other social initiatives, political parties, and organizations were tagged. The protesters thus drew attention online that they did not receive in the course of their procession, or even less during their final rally. The mediation of their protest involved creating a communicative presence on social media platforms and made their concern about Brexit highly visible there. In so doing, the community of protest appeared online to be far more united than it actually was most of the time. With the help of the #PeoplesVote hashtag, the protesters also inscribed themselves into the supra-regional context of the national day of action against Brexit on January 12. They situated their local protest in the broader anti-Brexit context and thereby charged it with referential meaning.

Social media communication expanded the reach of their on-site actions in a meaningful way and condensed the diffuse event on the ground into a symbolic online image. The two MPs, Thornberry and Corbyn, gained

[52] Islington In Europe (@IslingtonIn): "Tweet 1084156186637811712", Twitter, January 12, 2019, 7:32 p.m., https://twitter.com/IslingtonIn/status/1084156186637811712.

a presence – ironically, by being marked as absent. The protesters thus staged a contradiction: they appealed to Corbyn and Thornberry to represent them, but at the same time claimed that they themselves represented the popular will. With its paratextual framing, the scene became material for new agitation. The images were a visual means of making direct contact with the online audience and highlighting the lack of responsiveness by the two politicians to the wishes of their constituents. Although the protest received relatively little attention on the ground, Twitter offered the protesters an additional option for action and for drawing attention to their concerns. Online, they could define a self-chosen, unchallenged framework. Accordingly, they confidently promoted a strong interpretation of their actions: "a clear message."

Budapest, Hungary, January 19, 2019

When the above-mentioned "battle of the chain bridge" took place on January 19, 2019, I was standing on the arch of the bridge, both observing the crowd and exposing myself to it. More and more people had stopped in front of a police cordon and gathered around a group occupying the center of the bridge and refusing to leave. Behind the crowd, in the middle of the bridge as well, several police cars blocked traffic. The confrontation between the protesters and the police, however, could easily have been avoided. The police cordon only blocked the car lane in the middle of the bridge; the pedestrian paths on the left and right sides were narrow but freely accessible. Again and again, pedestrians made use of the walkways and continued unmolested towards the city center after briefly observing what was happening. Among those who stayed to watch, a recurring pattern developed. The events evolved into a back and forth between protesters and police. The loudspeaker of a police car repeatedly called on the protesters to leave the bridge. The crowd replied: "How many times are you going to say the same thing?" Several people filmed the incident from different angles. A young man right next to me streamed the events live on Facebook from his smartphone. His camera filmed the crowd from above and repeatedly zoomed in for detailed shots of individual scenes. At the same time, a count of up to 2000 online viewers was shown on the display, with thumbs-ups and other reactions swirling on the right edge of the screen. The important thing was that the possibility for the crowd to leave the bridge was not visible. It thus appeared to online observers that the people on the bridge were actually completely sealed off.

I noticed Gábor Szabó immediately because of his presence in the first row of the protesters and his use of a megaphone. He had already announced to his

6000 followers on Facebook that something special was going to happen.[53] His post had elicited a considerable number of reactions and comments, even though, or perhaps because, it was unclear what Szabó had in mind. Apparently, what we experienced on the bridge was part of his plan. Whether the others on the bridge knew about the plan was not something I was able to find out.

As the crowd got smaller and smaller, the situation suddenly escalated. Amidst protests, Szabó was arrested by several police officers and carried out of the crowd. Scuffles broke out among the bystanders. People with cameras rushed forward and filmed the scene from all sides. Shortly afterward, however, everything calmed down. Szabó appeared on the other side of the police cordon, spread his arms triumphantly, and waved to the other protesters. He then resumed negotiating with the police.

In the comments under Szabó's Facebook post of the previous day, various users repeatedly asked whether anyone had heard from him. It was not until the day after the protest that Szabó posted: "We got home from jail at midnight ... everything's all right with me, we accomplished what we set out to do:)."[54] A little later the same day, he posted a text that referred to the incident as the "battle on the chain bridge." As he does with his longer posts, he signed this one with an explicit request to share it widely. In his text, Szabó presented himself as a leader who would not back down, and an equal opponent for the state. In the end, he held out the prospect that there would be a "next time." Szabó's text did not make it clear what his original plan for the protest was, but it established a narrative dramaturgy into which he could insert the events on the chain bridge.

This narrative of the event was elaborated upon in the days following. On the bridge, Szabó had played with the situational dynamics of attracting attention and set up a situation that involved many pedestrians. He made use of the filmmakers and photographers who were present. At the same time, Szabó exposed himself to an unknown audience in various livestreams broadcast by onlookers. He had no control over which images were broadcast or what the images triggered in his viewers. He least of all had control over what would happen on-site. In the following days, Szabó continued to use the battle motif online and spun it further. On the one hand, he claimed to have planned everything exactly as it turned out. He reinterpreted the events in his favor and spoke explicitly about the image he wanted to create and the game he wanted to play. He also

[53] Szabó's Facebook profile can no longer be accessed but it was accessible when this analysis was first made in September 2019.

[54] The individual Facebook posts cannot be linked here and are therefore indicated below with their respective dates. This one is from January 20, 2019.

referred to a stage effect which he considered to make a stronger impression than a violent breach of the police cordon. In his online content, in this way, Szabó returned to the event again and again without explicitly using the images of it. Under the codeword "battle on the chain bridge," the incident found its way into Szabó's personalized narrative of resistance and became a quasi-historical event. It is impossible to say if all those participating in his social-media presentation experienced it that way or not, whether or not they were present on-site or vicariously through the livestream.

Dresden, Germany, February 11, 2019

On the evening of Monday, February 11, 2019, the anti-Islam group PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) marched through Dresden's city center for the 171st time in a row. The evening was the prelude to a week of protests in Saxony's capital city: February 13, 2019 marked the 74th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden at the end of World War II. In the week surrounding that date, Dresden is traditionally the scene of commemoration events, propagandistic marches by far-right groups, and anti-fascist counter-protests.

Observing the PEGIDA demonstration posed hitherto unknown difficulties for me. For the first time, I was dealing with a demonstration whose aims and behavior I clearly reject and condemn. More than in previous observations, I had to position myself not only interpretatively but also physically in relation to what was happening. As the demonstration in Dresden began at the main train station, I approached the crowd hesitantly from behind, stood as far to its edge as possible, and tried to avoid any direct eye contact with participants. Most of that evening I spoke my notes into a dictaphone in such a way that it looked as if I was talking on my mobile phone. This left me with a view from the outside of the protest that I later contrasted with the images of a livestream recorded on PEGIDA's official Facebook page. Online, it became evident how Siegfried Däbritz, one of the most popular PEGIDA activists who had recorded the livestream, turned the on-site protest – in which I saw a crowd of people slowly walking with flags, and which seemed not too spectacular to me on-site – into a heroic event. Online, Däbritz created a threatening atmosphere that legitimized PEGIDA's radical positions and the narrative of resistance he constructed.

When Däbritz first appeared in the livestream, about 45 minutes after the protest had begun, the online participants were waiting for him. Lutz Bachmann, who had been in charge of the camera up to this point, handed it over to

Däbritz saying: "Siggi, the people are calling for you!" From then on, the online audience could only hear and not see Däbritz. Alternating between insistent anti-immigration messages and flippant comments, Däbritz presented himself both as an entertainer and a serious leader. Right from the beginning, he let his viewers know that he expected them "to do this [regular protest marches like in Dresden – author] elsewhere as well." Again and again, Däbritz talked about himself and playfully promoted the mediality of the livestream. When he met another live-streamer, for instance, he filmed the other person's smartphone display, joked about it as a "picture in picture," and feigned surprise that the other stream had more viewers than his.

Däbritz also responded to viewers' online comments, picking out individual contributions and explaining and interpreting the images of the on-site protest. At the same time, he actively manipulated the protest with his instructions to those filmed ("can you walk a bit faster?"), deliberate selection of the images to show ("I won't show you the picture now, but ..."), and establishing the linguistic and dramaturgical framing of the visible images. When Däbritz spoke, for instance, about an obviously foreign onlooker as "a cultural enricher and his residence permit" (*Kulturbereicherer und seine Aufenthaltsgenehmigung*),[55] he didn't have to show the person to whom he was referring. His words evoked a negative image and a feeling of illegitimacy and failure of state policy in his viewers' minds. Several times Däbritz announced that he planned to give a "world-class speech" at the final rally of the protest. He created a link between the online audience and the protesters on-site, and a dramaturgy that transcended what was happening on-site and culminated with his speech. Through his choice of images and language, Däbritz established an atmosphere in which the online participants were supposed to feel constantly threatened, and also view Däbritz as a staunch resistance fighter against the threat. In so doing, Däbritz drew attention to certain elements of the protest he purposefully selected and interpreted for the online participants. The on-site protest was silent and shielded against outside observers, but Däbritz turned it into a powerful online appeal in the way he framed what was visible in the livestream and provoked his viewers' emotions with typical buzzwords.[56] He constructed a scenario of threat that was meant to

[55] The term *Kulturbereicher* is used with cynical sarcasm by German far-right extremists to insult migrants. See Neue Deutsche Medienmacher*innen: "Kulturbereicherer," https://glossar.neue-medienmacher.de/glossar/kulturbereicherer-2/.

[56] For a detailed analysis of the affective politics of the far-right see further Lars Koch and Torsten König, eds., *Zwischen Feindsetzung und Selbstviktimisierung: Gefühlspolitik und Ästhetik populistischer Kommunikation* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2020).

legitimize his and the other protesters' racist positions. Since this threat scenario was not grounded in reality, it had to be performed. For Däbritz, the online audience was a community that supported his self-presentation and provided him with material to perform on-site.

This was evident in Däbritz's closing speech, which I observed from outside the crowd and later rewatched in the recorded livestream. From the stage, Däbritz explicitly addressed his livestream viewers, asking: "When will your personal pain threshold be reached?" He said he could "no longer understand how you can be so jaded. ... Where has your honor gone? Where is your fighting spirit? Don't you even remember anymore that you have the power and no one else?" In the course of his speech to the on-site audience, Däbritz repeatedly asserted that Germany was faced with an imminent, costly struggle: "You will have to bite the bullet and lose friends. But, seriously, isn't it much more liberating to walk upright than walk bent over with false friends?" He lamented that he got "moist in the eyes" when he thought about the "indifference" that had spread in society. To those who had not yet gone into "visible resistance," he said, "Shame on you," then paused. He looked again into the camera. "But it doesn't have to stay that way." The audience started shouting: "This is our land!"

Discussion

As the brief presentations of the above cases show, protesters while protesting on-site use social media applications in several ways to reinforce their messages, shape their online appearances, frame and reframe their protests, and connect online audiences with on-site protests. Further research will be needed to identify more tactics. Some things can however already be mentioned and compared:

(1) There are differences between mediated protests in terms of their ability to generate public attention. The protesters in London got relatively little attention and participation, whether on-site or on Twitter. Gabór Szabó, however, managed to stage a spontaneous event that drew a growing number of participants both on-site and online over a longer period of time. The PEGIDA livestream offered a glimpse into a parallel reality inhabited by protesters who exist in a non-stop, constructed state of threat. On-site, however, the PEGIDA protest attracted comparatively little attention, mainly because the organizers explicitly requested the protesters to behave "appropriately,"

but also because the dynamics between protesters, counter-protesters, and uninvolved citizens followed what had become a routine pattern.

(2) There are differences in the form in which protesters' messages are mediated and in the corresponding practices. While the London protesters had an easier time condensing their appearance *photographically*, Gábor Szabó and Siegfried Däbritz both dealt in *moving images* in live-streamed videos. Däbritz used the medium of live-stream video to play with the public image of the PEGIDA protest. Szabó, on the other hand, was largely deprived of control over his image, due to the many people filming and livestreaming him.

(3) There are differences between the protests in terms of their temporality. In all three cases, the life of the on-site protest event was extended in time by its mediation online. The organizers of the Islington protest sent their tweet several hours after the on-site protest ended, but it still can be accessed today. Szabó narrativized the quasi-historical event on the chain bridge in Budapest even a few days after it took place. The PEGIDA livestream was still available on YouTube in 2020. At the same time, particularly the case of PEGIDA shows how protesters can use livestreams to create a virtual presence between on-site and online. He only attempted to gain control of the communicative power of the live-streamed images *after* the incident.

(4) The three protests differed in terms of who was acting and who was involved in the process of subjectifying the protesters. While the London group sought to focus attention on the protest community, Szabó and Däbritz were concerned with the characters they represented. Däbritz led an imagined movement that materialized on-site, but which claims to have supra-regional significance. Szabó primarily focused on himself, but in so doing he repeatedly relied on a diffuse oppositional mass supporting his narrative. Accordingly, he gave a substantial role in his protest to others, while Däbritz retained full control over his online appearance.

(5) There were also differences in the online reactions to each protest action. Whether the protest was mediated in a photo, video clip, or livestream conditioned how it was received by the online public. The London tweet was disseminated and increased in its visibility primarily by retweets and favs, but it quickly disappeared from people's Twitter feeds, which are designed for brevity and real-time communication. Szabó repeatedly elicited strong reactions and many shares by repeatedly posting information about his protest on Facebook. On the other hand, Däbritz's live commentary served as his communicative material during the live-stream.

(6) Finally, there are differences in the platforms that enabled the hybrid protest actions. While Facebook is more focused on the individual with its picture gallery and personal information, Twitter is primarily meant to facilitate a rapid flow of information. While Facebook is still the most popular social media platform, Twitter is mostly regarded an elite medium. In Hungary it is hardly relevant. Youtube's public image fluctuates between its role as the most popular web-based video platform (resulting in a struggle for attention by video activists) and its image as a "machine for radicalization" whose algorithm supposedly gives preference to radical content.[57]

Based on the performance-studies approach outlined in previous chapters, the different tactics of the protesters constitute a performative repertoire that is characteristic of the aesthetic practices of today's digitally mediatized protest culture between on-site and online. My focus is not on the message protesters want to give (however "clear" they claim it to be), but on the process of making meaning and producing presence. Social media offers protesters new possibilities for appearing online, but also confronts them with a double challenge. They have to elicit reactions and gain affirmation from an imagined online audience that constitutes a virtual political community. The protesters also have to maintain or at least claim that they maintain control over their images and protest messages in a media that is personalized and polyphonic. This does not necessarily mean that every tweet, post, or video is fiercely contested by other users, but that the principal aesthetic ambiguity and contingency of protests on-site is *disambiguated* by protesters' interpretations. At the same time, ambiguity and contingency are *potentially reinforced* through the multiplication of online stages and audiences, through other mediations and remediations of the initial event and the numerous perspectives on it.

Conclusion

This article has shown some of the ways in which protesters engage with social media in the course of on-site protests. In the digital age, social media is more than a simple add-on to on-site protest. It is impossible to maintain

[57] Zeynep Tufekci, "YouTube, the Great Radicalizer," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2018. See also Jonas Kaiser and Adrian Rauchfleisch, "How the Right Takes Advantage of YouTube," *Encore: The Annual Magazine on Internet and Society Research* 2018, 34–45.

a distinction between on-site and online, or analogue and digital. As I have shown, contemporary protest takes place on many stages provided by various social media sites. This is even more the case in the time of the pandemic, where online protests changed the relation between on-site and online. Instead of mediated images of central street protests, the main event now often appeared in a single web video stream that integrated other videos and pictures or was screened in other locations. The iconography of protest thus shifted from crowd scenes to people participating from their living rooms. Mostly empty streets in turn were used to produce additional images for the online event.

Under rapidly changing media conditions, protesters must use a whole set of different tactics in order to assert themselves and their political message online by interpreting their on-site protest event and choosing the images to be distributed. There is ample room in the future to explore how these tactics and practices can be conceptualized and analyzed in more detail, as well as how protesters' chosen images are received by different online audiences and how their choices shape the framing of their appearance during and after an on-site event.[58]

This article has outlined a path forward for further research in order that the crucial dimensions of contemporary on-site and online protest culture can be better understood. Several practical questions merit further discussion, for instance, whether it is necessary for the researcher to be present on-site, and some ethical questions. The ability to participate in distant protest events challenges researchers to reflect on the question of where to direct their attention, and how to fit their theories and methodologies to a multiplicity of networked publics. A performance-studies approach, which focuses on the aesthetic practices of protest, is one important methodology for studying protests and movements. It can shed light on what protesters actually do when they are protesting, how they do it, and not least how they involve us as spectators and researchers.

[58] One way forward could be understanding these tactics and strategies as attempts to gain *communication power* under the media conditions of the social web. See Jo Reichertz, Kommunikationsmacht (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2010); Holger Herma and Laura Maleyka, "Subjektinszenierung und Kommunikationsmacht Digital," in *Das vergessene Subjekt. Subjektkonstitutionen in mediatisierten Alltagswelten*, ed. Peter Gentzel et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), 229, doi: 10.1007/978-3-658-23936-7_11.