

**Ethnographic Perspectives on the Communicative
Processing of Music Events by Teens**

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I. Introduction

My lecture deals with the communicative processing of a media event by the young. The music industry and others operating in the youth-culture scene continue to organise an increasing number of such events. These normally take place in unusual venues and aim at providing a 'complete experience', targetting all the senses, and affording their 'lifestyle clientele' an otherwise difficult-to-create feeling of togetherness. Events such as the Love Parade, the Street Parade or the Wave Gothic Meeting (still) seem to recognise no limits in their number or size. For those attending such events they occupy a particular role in the flow of everyday life, standing out from it and casting a shadow over it, both before and afterwards, when it becomes the stuff of narration. For those taking part such an event is not simply a one-off experience limited to a particular time and space, it is also a symbolic entity, which during the course of time takes on diverse forms, influenced by expectation, memory and fantasy. In communication with others these diverse feelings find structure, expression and modification. I will therefore, in the following, consider an event from two combined perspectives:

- In the process perspective I will examine the changing significance of an event in the subjective perception of the visitor, and will consider how this develops before the event takes place, during its course, and also in subsequent retrospective reflection.

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- From the communication perspective I will ask through which communicative practices these different symbolic constructions are realised, and which functions they fulfill for those involved. Particular attention will be given to the function, for the visitor, of communicative activity concerning the event as regards his or her self-representation as a social unit.

Before I come to the empirical material, I would like to mention two aspects of the latest Media Studies' theoretical discourse. In the framework of Cultural Studies in particular, two points of view are raised again and again. The first aspect concerns basically the relevance to identity of such communication, and the second aspect considers the communicative appropriation of cultural products by the recipient:

- First aspect: The relevance of communication to identity is derived from elementary pragmatic differentiation. In interacting we not only convey content explicitly, but also transmit implicit messages. When people talk together they exchange factual information. But they also simultaneously reveal - although of course hidden to a certain extent - for whom or what they would like to be considered, for whom or what they consider the other to be, and which type of relationship they imagine to have with the other person. That interacting with each other is always relevant to identity has been demonstrated impressively in numerous studies by the American sociologist Erving Goffman. In short, communicating with each other means trading aspects of identity. Identity is ultimately based upon the realisation of its various aspects in the process of interaction. It is manufactured in situations and communications.
- The second aspect, the appropriation of cultural events, is referred to from the theoretical perspective in Cultural Studies as 'interaction' of the medium with the recipient. What is meant is that these aspects of culture are not simply consumed but are actively appropriated. Appropriation means in this sense the smooth integration of a cultural or media event by the recipient in his or her everyday world. In particular, where participation in such an event by the young is concerned, its integration in everyday life, as well as its relevance to identity, merit some examination. Where, as in the case presented here, participation is in an international event which has been defined by marketing strategy, then the global world of transnational youth culture meets the local world of the respective peer group. With reference to the sociological research about the so-called 'individualisation thesis' youth culture can be considered to be an all-

encompassing lifestyle concept. This however has its roots in the youth's local group and is processed communicatively at this level. This all means that a cultural event is appropriated by the group in their anticipation of it, during the event itself when the group members speak about it, and also following it when particular experiences and impressions are exchanged. By the group's setting itself as a whole in relation to the media event, aspects of identity are simultaneously actualised and produced. How this creation and development of identity are practised, and which conclusions can then be drawn, will now be considered.

II The Event: the Air and Style Contest in Innsbruck

The Air & Style Snowboard Contest has been held in the Berg Isel Stadium in Innsbruck/Austria for seven years. Formerly more of a local event, it now forms one of the core components of the international snowboarding scene. Here the world's best snowboarders have the chance to demonstrate their skills on the purpose-built ramp beneath the giant ski jump of the mountain stadium. In its first year the event received 2000 visitors, nowadays the figure is closer to 40 000, the majority of those attending aged between 13 and 25. The event is organised by Monster Backside Magazin, a snowboard periodical, and is supported by noteworthy advertisers, such as G-Shock (Casio) who are the main sponsors, as well as MTV, Audi, Warsteiner, Reef and Quiksilver, the last two being two of the scene's leading fashion labels. The highlight of the tournament is the Contest, a competition between the snowboarders to do the highest, longest, most stylish jump. Concerts, parties, and fire and light spectacles, as well as merchandising stands and numerous smaller contests form the backdrop to the competition's proceedings. The bands and DJs are those familiar to and popular with members of the snowboarding public. This has meant in recent times those from the Hip Hop and Grunge/Crossover fields. Before and during the contests in 1998 the groups Therapy and Cypress Hill played, both bands being in the middle of European tours. After the day's events MTV, in collaboration with the Ministry of Sound and the firm Nintendo, organised a post-contest party, which took place on several floors of a renowned Innsbruck concert hall.

II.1 Before the event: the build up of expectation

In the group of 15 to 17 year-old male youths observed by us specific preparation for the forthcoming event was seen to take place. This consisted of all manner of reflection upon it and of making the forthcoming event 'comprehensible'. The announcements and flyers of the organisers contained much of symbolic significance for the young and provided a lot of scope for fantasy and imagination, the spectacular being a recurrent motif. With which specific communicative practices did the observed group structure their expectations and ideas about the imminent event?

- *Imaginative reflection* should be first of all mentioned. From six to four weeks before the event the youths began seeking to exceed each other in their conception as to what would take place. This consisted of wish projection and the romanticisation of individual aspects: the youths imagined that the sexiest, most attractive women would be attending, that the parties taking place there would be the coolest, and the musical acts were almost deified. Furthermore, even the journey there afforded a certain magical quality. In conversation with work colleagues the separation of the event from the sphere of normal everyday activity was repeatedly emphasised. Both processes led to the formation of sayings (one cue-word being "Innsbruck") and ritualised running gags, which both served the function of bonding those travelling together.
- Secondly, *practical reflection* also took place; the youths became frantically busy. Planning and preparation were discussed extensively to the point of excess. This was revealed particularly in the meaningless and unnecessary questions put to the team observing the group, as well as in complicated, continually re-negotiated arrangements with each other.
- Thirdly, *reflection through boasting* was noted to take place. Boasting to those unable to travel to the event fulfilled the function of transforming the destination into something special. Alongside the function of reflection however, the activity also played a role in supporting group-building. Those travelling to the event saw themselves as a privileged group compared to those remaining at home.

These various processes allowed those involved to take individual episodes from an anticipated future experience, to represent them orally and to charge them with diffuse attributes and expectations. The short reference "Innsbruck" functioned as a manifestation of the future event and became in the time leading up to it a key word, representing for the group all of

their specific themes and everything they had considered particular about it and remote from everyday life.

II.2 During the event: problems and disillusionment

For the group observed by us, the day of the 'mega event' ran as follows: As no tickets had yet been purchased, the group, despite arriving late the previous night, had to get up extremely early on the morning of the event to avoid the risk of being unable to get tickets after the long journey. The situation in front of the stadium was chaotic, none of the organisers being able to give information as to where and when tickets would be available. The youths wandered to and in front of the stadium entrance in order to be sure that the decisive moment would not be missed. Although the temperature was between -15 and -20 °C and not all of the group were wearing appropriate winter clothing, they waited for the next two and a half hours there. By 12 o'clock all had tickets for the contest as well as for the aftershow party, which led again to feverish excitement. There were four hours to go until the event began and as they were all frozen, the group decided to head back to the pension where they lay on their beds, talked and watched television. Not until 5 p.m. did they manage to pull themselves together again which led to slight tension amongst them. The return to the stadium proved to be more troublesome than had previously been the case in the morning as many of the approaching streets were now completely closed, and all parking spaces occupied. Participation in the event was accordingly delayed once again and the whole group began to moan and complain about the inconvenience. On arrival the crater-shaped Berg Isel Stadium was already packed and the band Therapy were already playing. All seats were already taken. The group of youths observed by us positioned themselves near the stadium exit by the highest row of seats, where they stayed for the remainder of the event. From this position however both the stage and the jump could only be seen with difficulty. The amplification system was insufficient to cover the whole stadium and the concert's atmosphere did not reach the position where our group was standing. Despite the thronging crowds and the resulting proximity of the visitors to one another, there was no contact with any other visitors, nor with the much spoken-about female snowboarders, as they had previously longed for. After a short time the group began to be troubled by the cold, which had been underestimated by all of them. The youths slowly became restless as another 4 or 5 hours lay ahead of them. The excitement generated by the appearance of Cypress Hill and the contest itself, disappeared quickly. The group seemed to be longing for the end of the event shortly after its

beginning. The countless jumps, which did not differ spectacularly from one another, were followed by the youths only sporadically. During the supposedly exciting final of the contest, the group were already discussing how they could leave the stadium before the crowds. Immediately following the announcement of the victor, the group left. Excitedly the youths went then to the after contest party, which according to their expectations would be *the* event of the year. There was a great deal of congestion in front of the entrance to the four vast factory halls and a little patience was needed during the preliminary security checks. The jostling of the masses continued in the various rooms of the event and the group were unsure where they should seat themselves and wandered through the extremely hot, loud hall until they found a small podium with tables and chairs at the end of one of the halls. As in the stadium the group, having found a place, remained very static for the rest of the evening and did not join in with events there. The music being too loud however to converse, the activity of the group consisted for the rest of the evening of observing what was happening and smoking. None of the youths attempted to make contact with another of the visitors. *The* party of the year proved to be a flop, the wished-for ‘ultimate kick’ eluding the youths.

II.3 After the event: processing of discrepant experiences

When the group’s previous expectations are compared with the actual course of events during the evening a clear discrepancy between expectations and reality can be established. Above all, the fantasies the group had about the event, with all their socio-symbolic associations, proved to be excessive, and the group were unable to find this imagined excess in reality. The questions now arise, as to how this disillusionment fits into the everyday life of the youths, and how is it processed? Generally speaking, the youths tried to absorb and defuse such discrepant experience within the group. This took place through *communicative processes aimed at reducing the discord between expectation and reality*:

- Firstly an intensive search for the causes of the perceived failure took place, which led to the *dramatisation of external reasons*; the supposedly peculiar behaviour of other visitors in an unfamiliar place, combined with an ‘uncool’ party took the blame for everything – according to the motto, “the people there were strange”.
- Secondly, *renormalisation* took place: Along with a search for reasons the youths started to adjust to the new situation. They tried to minimise the disillusionment (“we didn’t miss anything, the party was shit anyway”). They also endeavoured to find positive aspects in

the new situation (“wicked, let’s go to McDonalds again”). Both functioned as strategies, which allowed the redefinition of the experienced disillusionment in order to avoid those aspects which would have damaged the image of the group.

- Thirdly, a *collection of the highlights suitable for inclusion in later stories* about the day took place. The youths began to sort out the positive and presentable aspects of the event. Individual aspects and single elements of the event were selected (e.g. the performance of Cypress Hill) and were dramatised and condensed.

This all happened while the groups were leaving the disappointing party. In the following we will consider what of the event was taken home to the group’s everyday clique.

II. 4 Memories of the event: legends and trophies

Firstly, it can be said that the actual experiences of the event were *retrospectively ordered according to their presentability to the group’s everyday clique*. The discrepancies associated with the event were completely revised, now becoming dramatic stories. On the journey home the youths began to review the event and concentrated on those aspects which had already been discussed before the event, and which appeared to be acceptable for narration. For instance, the boring aftershow contest party was changed by the youths to an extreme bodily experience; the party was so extreme that it hurt the eyes and lungs, and brought on claustrophobia, a typical comment being “we could have died there”. Whether these extreme descriptions were meant positively or negatively was left open. Most important was the enjoyment of the extraordinary and delight in the extremes. The *general pattern of the event’s processing*, in other words, that which remains in memory of such an event, can be summarised as follows:

- *The interactive production of ‘legends’*, consisted of stylising individual aspects of the event and taking them to extremes as well as the construction of absurd scenarios. This procedure took its starting point from real situations, which were then subsequently transformed.
- In contrast to that, the *recollection and presentation of trophies* refers to the subsequent recurrence of significant youth culture names and labels, such as Air&Style, or Cypress Hill. In contrast to the aforementioned legend-forming, such symbolically important labels need no special format, providing presentable stories as they are. The simple statement of

fact (“I saw Cypress Hill live“) is enough to conjure up appropriate images in the recipient. In this way it is easier to separate what was expected from the actual experience. After the event it is apparently unimportant for the youths whether or not cult band Cypress Hill were good or how they played, or whether or not the Air & Style Contest was cold and stressful. Important is simply the fact that one was there, and that one is able to present this being there as a trophy to those who stayed at home.

III Conclusion: ‘Tnnsbruck was amazing’

The above has sought until now to demonstrate how youth-cultural events are appropriated by the young. An attempt has also been made to reconstruct the event from the perspective of an actual participating group of youths. The representation corresponds closely to the empirical material, including field notes and recordings of conversations with the youths. The analytical preparation of the data presented here allows for a variety of follow-ups and interpretations. To conclude however I shall concentrate on a combination of two points, namely the connection between a symbolic, global youth culture scene as a large virtual society, and the concrete local peer group.

III.1 Inside youth-cultural contexts: events as a ‘core devoid of meaning’

To the first point: in the 1970s and 1980s youth culture formed itself according to extra-symbolic Bricolage processes, which meant that objects and symbols of the official culture were taken, decontextualised, and transformed. In the 1990s the jungle of youth culture appeared for many to become impenetrable, and with this came a lack in understanding of the diverse scenes’ many reference points. The consumer goods market, the media, and advertising all play a decisive role in this diversification process: youth cultures arise from the marketing process, which constructs target-groups according to music, clothing and consumer preferences. This allows advertising to target its consumers effectively. This is supposed to guarantee success for certain brands which then lend a certain attractiveness to the associated event or media packet, e.g. Snowboard, Hip Hop, Cross-Over. These brands represent youth-cultural trophies, which are used by the participating youths to lend meaning to an event in its preconstruction and reconstruction. In this manner a ‘core devoid of meaning’, as I will call it, is formed. Along with the actual experience, which is often lacking in spectacle, disillusioning or simply frustrating, stand the before and after, which are surprisingly resistant to

disappointment and ambiguity, and avoid too much detail. In the before and after, the event is established as a schematised substrate. Processes of communicative reflection play an essential role in the modification and stabilisation of the event's interpretation as contrasted to its actual course. Participants reassure each other that they were there, but little more is actually expressed.

III. 3 Global events as occasions for local peer group activity

Up to now however, what we have considered has made clear that the various offerings of the youth culture scene should not be considered as individual isolated units, but as a symbolic framework which is further developed and supplemented according to the group's or individual's developmental needs. In our case the sex of the participants and the constitution of the group stood particularly in the foreground. On the one hand this finding demonstrates that youth culture and its commercial manifestations emerge first of all through their communicative processing by a group of participants. Issues relevant to everyday life are actualised in a new and extraordinary framework. On the other hand however, such peer-group specific interaction concerning youth culture allows us an insight into the everyday life of a youth clique: the fact that the observed group behaved in *this* particular manner reveals something to us of each individual's values, leading to the aforementioned result, namely "Innsbruck was wild", despite the disillusionment and disappointment. This leads us to further conclusions regarding the specific forms of identity management within the group as regards their interaction with youth cultural events. Beyond all conceptions of youth culture as an internationalised community, and eclectic biography-building sensory experience, the observations show one thing: youths spend their everyday life principally in a peer group formed locally and have to slot the various offerings of youth culture into their everyday existence, using the usual coping strategies in the process. The observed youths displayed distance to the public event and this functioned with regard to their lives' context as a protective mechanism, which combined two motifs: the glamour of saying "I've been somewhere to be envied", which functioned as a trophy, had to be combined with the problem of being in a strange, unfamiliar situation. The youths discussed overcame this problem by travelling through these strange surroundings as a *local peer group*. In light of this, the question is raised as to how much of a global culture children and youths are actually capable of accepting or ready to recognise?

Figure: Ethnographic Perspectives on the Communicative Processing of Music Events by Teens

Before the Event	During the Event	After the Event	Memories of the Event
<p>The building up of Expectancies:</p> <p>(i) Imaginative Reflection</p> <p>(ii) Practical Reflection</p> <p>(iii) Reflection through Boasting</p>	<p>Problems and Disillusionment:</p> <p>Frustration of nearly all expectancies</p>	<p>Processing of Discrepant Experiences:</p> <p>Communicative Processes Aimed at Reducing the Discord between Expectation and Reality:</p> <p>(i) Dramatisation of External Reasons</p> <p>(ii) Renormalisation</p> <p>(iii) Collection of the Highlights Suitable for Inclusion in Later Stories</p>	<p>Legends and Trophies:</p> <p>(i) The Interactive Production of ,Legends‘</p> <p>(ii) Recollection and Presentation of Trophies</p> <hr/> <p><u>Conclusions:</u></p> <p>(i) <i>Inside Youth-Cultural Contexts: Events as a ,Core devoid of Meaning‘</i></p> <p>(ii) <i>Events as Occasions for Peer Group Activity</i></p>

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