Powerful Entanglements: Interrelationships Between Platform Architectures and Young People's Performance of Self in Social Media

Viktoria Flasche

Abstract This chapter explores intertwinements between digital media and communicative and socio-cultural practices as they emerge in relation to contemporary cultures, specifically youth cultures. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are discursive-operative networks within a framework of economic strategies. The chapter's empirical approach draws on the assumption that young people's aesthetic practices, transmitted via social media formats, evoke in each instance specific relational modes that preform a space of possible subject positions. The chapter summarises the findings of two selective longitudinal studies examining young people's practices of self-articulation, consistently interpreted in the context of the specific platform used in each instance. These findings point to the potential of aesthetic-tentative practices as performed by young people to catalyse societal critique.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Social networks provide a range of possibilities for individuals to express themselves within a personalisable virtual space; in so doing, incidentally to their primary economic purpose, they offer us role models and ‘tribes’ with which we may align ourselves socially. The current generation of young people¹ is the first to have grown up with social media networks as a ubiquitous and everyday part of life (Röll, 2014, Lovink, 2012: 37; MPFS, 2018). Negotiating friendships has always been a part of teen life. Prior to the social media age, however, most of these negotiations took place implicitly, without explicit labels (Boyd, 2008). Unlike adults, faced with relearning aspects of their public behaviour due to the impact of networked technologies, teens simply learn from the outset how to handle themselves publicly with networked audiences in mind (ibid., p. 295). Young people’s contemporary lifeworlds are in effect post-digital—to note this is not to imply that digitalisation is already complete, but rather to acknowledge that, in light of the complex digital transformation of all aspects of everyday life and of its diverse manifestations, the analogue/digital distinction is no longer enough (Cramer, 2014). In addition to this, the digital documentation in social media of practices which face-to-face interaction cannot pin down opens up a research opportunity for empirical approaches (Manovich, 2012; Schreiber & Kramer, 2016).

This article explores the intertwinements between digital media and communicative and socio-cultural practices as they emerge in relation to contemporary cultures, specifically youth cultures (Joerissen, 2018; Hugger, 2013). Its particular emphasis, from the point of view of theories of *Bildung*² (Joerissen, 2018; Bublit, 2014; Richter & Allert, 2017), is on the ways in which social media practices generate identities and subjectivities. My central interest is in identifying which processes of subjectivation unfold in the field of tension between the socio-technical structure of the social media platform in question and the individual’s relationship with the self as reflected in multimedia representations of that self. The work underlying this chapter was a selective longitudinal examination of aesthetic practices of self-representation as engaged in by young people

between 2013 and 2019, taking into account the socio-technical architectures of the platforms they used. The analysis that follows encompasses two empirical projects, a study of Facebook profiles (Flasche, 2017a, b, 2018) and the qualitative findings of the (Post-) Digital Cultural Youth Worlds (DiKuJu) study undertaken in Germany between 2016 and 2019.³ The extended analysis also includes older studies which explored such practices.

2 CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL VIEWPOINT: SUBJECTIVATION IN THE FIELD OF TENSION BETWEEN THE MEDIUM AND ITS PRACTICES

Social media platforms are part of dynamic networks with flexible structures; they form the new morphology of the current social order. We might operationalise the concept of the *dispositive* (Foucault, 2008, p. 199) to the end of perceiving them as networks of conditions, “expansions and sediments of power” (Reichert, 2008, p. 14).⁴ Media dispositives are subject to historical cycles, and media historiography can enable us to analytically access processes of subjectivation (*ibid.*). Compared to the discourse concept, the concept of the *dispositive* expands the perspective: “While—metaphorically speaking—the discourse analyst wants to ‘discover’ the conditions and rules of the practice of making statements through and beyond the statements, and from there draw conclusions about the consequences of the ‘true knowledge’ processed in this way, from the perspective of *dispositive* theory the statement formations in their spatio-temporal situation form the analytical starting point of the research perspective” (Schneider, 2015, p. 31).

Any analysis of contemporary aesthetic practices communicated via media will need to take account of their historicity, focusing on points or phases of transition rather than on supposedly absolute moments of rupture and upheaval: “The performative and subversive energy of social practices of appropriation [and adoption of new forms of media] makes for an inhomogeneous, dystopic and divergent tectonic landscape when it comes to technical ruptures in media [formats and use]” (*ibid.*, p. 18). Since the turn of the last millennium, “protocol-logical networks” (Galloway & Thacker, 2007) have become the new social normality. Their databases are spaces for the doubtless hegemonic construction of

categorical identities and collectives, with the effect of pre-structuring modes of perception and practice (Jörissen, 2020, p. 351).

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are discursive-operative networks within a framework of economic strategies. They create reactive media spaces of the convergence of various divergent forms of media, such as text and still or moving images. This means that those operating the platforms, who are active in economic intent and interest, create reactive and responsive virtual-creative space by means of processes largely controlled by algorithms. Reactivity, in this sense, refers to the constitutive dependence of social media platforms and of their algorithmic decision-making processes on the activities of their users. Pointing to the findings of foundational information research, Nassehi certifies that the algorithms currently used in some social media are capable of developing “selective intrinsic activity” (Nassehi, 2019, p. 238). These algorithms are able, on the basis of user activities, to abductively draw their own conclusions that go beyond what human actors have programmatically designed (*ibid.*, p. 241). These deep learning processes have reinforced the role of software and hardware as co-constructors of images and practices of self-presentation among young people (Schreiber, 2017). Schreiber was able to demonstrate empirically how smartphones and specific social media apps influence the images young people produce. An ability of these apps to increase user activity via reactive algorithmic decision-making processes would augment this influence still further. One already evident upshot of this is that platforms such as TikTok, for example, can place advertising in the stream of images in such a way that it is almost impossible to identify it as such.

The platforms analysed in the research set out here all work on the basis of the same business model, which primarily pursues profitable operation via increasing the number of people staying and engaging on the platform in order to target them with personalised advertising. A further aspect of this business model relates to selling on the data collected via the platform, largely for market research purposes. The platforms’ interfaces act as hubs for these processes and constitute the designed, formalised framework that defines the possibility and impossibility of interactions. In investigating their activity in this context, we need to perceive them as a product of all their informational and structural features; this will enable us to identify how complex social mechanisms such as the establishment of a shared or ubiquitous practice materialise—or dematerialise—in algorithmically controlled operations.

The focus on operationalisation and monetisation which characterises these platforms calls for the addition of a subjectivation-related perspective to a theory-based analysis of media practices: Each platform generates specific scenarios of invocation to the user's self. Although the self is susceptible to the appropriating and controlling action of various techniques imposed from without, it is also capable of evading institutional access and inventing new forms, affects and intensities of being.

3 A TRANS-ACTIONAL RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

The evocative character of media is a central factor in the processes of subjectivation described by Bublitz (2010) following Butler (2003): "Media are loci both of the individual's repeated linguistic and visual self-presentation and self-representation and of the subject's self-production in both senses of the term—a self-presentation and self-representation as a social subject." (Bublitz, 2014 p. 12). In this context, I have based my empirical approach on the assumption that the aesthetic practices of young people, transmitted via social media formats, evoke in each case specific relational modes that preform the space of possible subject positions. The relationally integrated practices of a young person serve as a case in which we observe this evocation: "The prototypical character immanent to things, the structurally immanent knowledge they embody, brings its influence to bear both on the 'possibilities of their use' and, at a theoretically more profound level, their relational potential with regard to other (material or human) actors. In the context of everyday practices, things, and environments of things, represent invitations to subjectivation, specifically, therefore, invitations to become user-subjects (consumers, audiences, prosumers etc.) in a particular way." (Joerissen, 2015, p. 218). Following this view, we may identify the trans-actional nature of young people's media-based practices, their location in the space between the practice and its medium. In this sense, my qualitative approach aims at the reconstructive analysis of this in-between and draws on the analysis both of the specific platform's socio-technical architecture and on the articulations made within this by young users.

Orders of visibility on social media applications are subject to the '*creativity dispositive*' (*Kreativitätsdispositiv*) (Reckwitz, 2015), which enables specific self-positionings of the subject. Reckwitz' analyses in this context refer to changes in Western societies since the end of the twentieth century (ibid., p. 1). The characteristic feature of the previously dominant

‘rationalisation dispositive’ was its orientation towards schematising and standardising subjects and things. The creativity dispositive, by contrast, centres on audiences, singularities and intensified affectivity: “This dispositive, at its core, is a configuration of the social in which subjects gather as an audience for objects or other subjects which make a significant or sensory impression and simultaneously render themselves performers [or potential performers] to such an audience. Neither objects nor subjects are formed here as replications and repetitions of the same, as in the rationalisation dispositive, but instead [emerge] as singularities, i.e. as non-comparable instances of the particular”. (ibid., p. 2).

In this way, viewed from a Foucauldian perspective emphasising power, it is evident that all social media platforms act as “subjectivation apparatuses” leading “to the voluntary self-exploitation of private life” (Wueschner, 2019, p. 254). However, this view runs the risk of losing sight of productive and transformative moments in the practices associated with social media, which their users encounter with an aesthetic attitude that fundamentally follows a playful premise “and makes the end in itself of simulation strong against the purpose as a means of communication” (ibid., p. 256).

4 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND STATE OF RESEARCH: THE RECENT DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S PRACTICES OF SELF-PRESENTATION PRACTICES

This chapter seeks to illuminate its subject via analysis of findings obtained from two distinct studies. The first took place on a corpus of 428 Facebook profile photographs of young people collected in mid-2013 from Facebook groups formed under the names of German secondary schools. The central interest was in identifying which processes of subjectivation unfold in the field of tension between the socio-technical structure of the social media platform in question—in this case, Facebook—and the individual’s relationship with the self as reflected in multimedia representations of that self. In line with the heuristics developed in the context of the study’s research question, the entire corpus has been encoded. Classification of the corpus took place in accordance with the ‘serial-iconographic’ photograph analysis method described by Pilarczyk and Mietzner (2005). The core of this approach is the reciprocal relationship of two procedures to each other, these being the iconographic/iconological interpretation of

individual images—following Panowsky (1983) and Imdahl (1980)—as well as the serial analysis of entire collections of photographs. The aim of this combination is to test and quantify the hypotheses obtained in the detailed analysis on a larger corpus of images. Pilarczyk and Mietzner thus aim in their method for a *via media* between qualitative and quantitative research logic (ibid., p. 131).

Other changes have taken place in terms of social media use by age group. In the 1990s, Turkle (1995) was able to describe multi-user-media applications as a moratorium, as a free space for virtually trying out alternate roles. As late as 2008, Boyd stated that most of the young people she had interviewed conceived of MySpace and Facebook as “effectively teen space” (Boyd, 2008, p. 290). Seen from today’s vantage point, these views, suggesting as they did that social media had the capacity to undermine adult control over young people’s lives, conceptualise the *old* internet, shaped by liberating and participatory values (Lovink, 2012). The economically-driven properties of today’s social media platforms renders these ideas outdated. Adults have taken to—some might say taken over—the platforms previously used by teenagers, which, in line with their reactive design, have partially responded to this takeover. To a degree, however, new platforms have emerged that specifically address teenage needs for a space in which adult control is suspended. One example is Snapchat, whose response to young people’s experience of consistent visibility online has drawn precisely that constituency to it (MPFS, 2018).⁵

It is evident, then, that social media practices and applications have diversified to a striking extent between 2012 and the present moment. Accordingly, the first study in the context of my doctoral research, whose findings this chapter discusses, bears of necessity the caveat that the cultural patterns it has captured may already have disappeared when these findings see the light of day. The speed of change in this field effectively consigns detailed case studies to historiography (Lovink, 2012, p. 15). The German “Shell Study” for 2019 also states that constant change in media use is typical of the current generation of young people, and that studies in this area very quickly become outdated (Albert et al., 2019, p. 40).

It is for this reason that this detailed discussion of this study’s findings have to take into account those of a second study, “Postdigital Cultural Youth Worlds”, which ran between 2016 and 2019, investigating the social impact of the digital transformation on young people’s current artistic/creative practices, their cultural education and their engagement in

cultural life and activities. In parallel to a quantitative representative interview study, the research design encompassed qualitative online surveys, expert interviews and group discussions with young people, casuistic analyses of selected individual cases, and a methodological outline of the specific OpenSpace ‘Barcamp’ format.⁶ The project’s first, exploratory phase concentrated on developing an overview of young people’s (post-)digital aesthetic practices, primarily employing descriptive methodological approaches. The work included expert interviews with professionals from the field of cultural education and group discussions with young people recruited from culture-related institutions (schools with a cultural focus, young people’s media centres). The findings of this research served as a basis for the design of the items in the quantitative sub-project, alongside enabling further targeted surveys conducted as theoretical sampling and providing the project outcomes with greater nuance and depth. Reconstructive in-depth analysis took place on young people’s cultural practices emerging in the context of the Barcamp format and transactional interviews held during a digital festival (Joerissen et al., 2020). Thus far, education studies have primarily operationalised transactional perspectives for the purpose of incorporating spaces and material worlds of things in research (Nohl, 2017). This transactional research methodology opens up an empirical view of the constitutive property of physical, material and spatial actors in its capacity “to reconstruct the genesis of these entities from transactional practices” (ibid., p. 1). This approach to research centres reconstructive artefact analysis and, put in terms of actor-network theory (Latour, 2006), engages with both human and non-human actors on an equal level. With regard to the research field of the two studies described here, an analysis of social media platforms takes the place of artefact analysis. The use of this approach, in a modified form, is restricted to where the analysis of hardware, such as smartphones and the corresponded software. The findings detailed in this chapter will consist primarily of these transactional interviews.

Together, these two distinct pieces of research provide a selective longitudinal section of the practices by which young people articulate their ideas of their selves, consistently interpreted in the context of the specific platform used in each case. The discussion that follows will supply an overview of the most significant aspects of the analyses and combine them with central findings from the analysis of still and moving images and from interviews. The transactional methodology employed here thus enables

the illumination of entanglements between social media platforms and their users' practices.

The examination of the findings employed the dimensions of social media analysis proposed by van Dijck and Poell (2013), which distinguish between the levels of the user, the business model, content, ownership, governance, and technology, the latter sub-divided in turn into (meta)data algorithms, protocols, interfaces and defaults. Interfaces had a particular role in the analysis. An interface acts to bring together formalised frameworks for possible interactions, i.e. it is the product of all informational and structural features of the platform and a pre-formalisation of the practices that take place on it. At the interfaces of the practices, only those practices are possible for which the settings provide. Even if algorithmic decision-making processes are able to restructure themselves reactively with regard to user activity, all possible activities are only possible in categories created in line with the platform's logic. The possibilities for interaction designed within the interface elicit processes of subjectivation. This space entails the design of specific user-subjects required to behave in a certain way if they are to 'act with the app'; one example might be following the app-imposed compulsion to present/display/represent themselves visually.

5 EXCURSUS: SOCIO-TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT DURING THE PERIOD UNDER STUDY USING FACEBOOK AS AN EXAMPLE

Evaluation of the classifications obtained needs to proceed in consideration of Facebook's specificity as a social media platform. The social media age commenced with market leadership held by specific distinct platforms, such as Facebook, MySpace and (in the German-language context) the student platform StudiVZ, especially among teenagers and young adults. At the present time, by contrast, young people's social media activity typically takes in a number of networks and platforms (MPFS, 2020, p. 31). Until about 2015, Facebook was the social network with the largest number of members, which it associated with a claim to represent the present and future of discourse on social issues (Miller, 2012, p. 10). Miller's analysis of Facebook usage—albeit stemming from a strongly location-bound ethnographic analysis—formulates optimistic theses suggesting the capacity of social media to drive positive societal transformations. Alongside

this optimism, a view arose which emphasised the market-shaped channeling of communication on Facebook in particular. In 2012, one year before the study we refer to above, Facebook's rigid and biographically-based appeal to the self (Wiedemann, 2011) continued to dominate the social media landscape. According to Lovink (2011, p. 183), the platform was instrumental in establishing a "culture of self-revelation" and of the management of the self as a central mode of social media use. In the course of 2014, however, it lost its market leadership for young Americans aged between 13 and 19 (Piper Jaffray Survey, 2014); currently, Facebook is ranked only the eighth most popular social media site among 12- to 19-year-old Germans (MPFS, 2018, p. 35). At the time of my first study Facebook held a form of monopoly position in young people's social media use and served to network and manage various sub-systems, such as Instagram. As a company, Facebook formally owns current market leaders such as Whatsapp and Instagram; as a platform, it has, as indicated above, lost its supremacy as a social medium and as the priority tool for managing 'collapsed contexts' (Boyd, 2014, p. 31). In this sense, on the specific level of social media interaction, Facebook has retreated backstage, controlling the current 'front stages' in terms of IT and organisation.

During Facebook's golden age, although around three-quarters of 12- to 25-year-olds were aware of the danger associated with the publication of personal data online and large businesses, insofar as their policies became public, tended to view Facebook at least critically, the platform's use nevertheless appeared to them as a 'must-do' (Albert et al., 2015, p. 130). The numerous interviews Boyd conducted with young people appeared to uncover a key reason for this, namely that Facebook served its young users as a "context manager" via which they handled their online relationships with family, school and various circles of friends; one result was that these young people's profiles tended to be completely public to broad groups of other users (Boyd, 2014, p. 32). At an explicit level, the front stage, Facebook attempted to market itself as a platform for "real" people (Zuckerberg, cited in Boyd, 2014, p. 50). At the implicit level, however, it never seriously tried to realise this claim. Although it asked users to use their real names and deleted any fake pages brought to its attention, it was always possible for users to run several pages at the same time with little effort and thus to operate decidedly selective identity management. Facebook has now made changes to its security settings; where they previously inherently implied a rigid regime of visibility, they now offer a wider range of options than in 2012. For example, it has become

easier for users to personalise their security settings and thus control the range of their visibility on the platform; there have also been changes to default security and visibility settings. It is important, however, to note the commercial impetus behind this development; technical advances have made it possible to process large volumes of metadata at great speed and therefore place ‘personalised’ advertising even without strict profile management. Facebook no longer writes to all users with obviously made-up names and threatens to delete their profiles if they do not switch to using their real names. New users creating their profiles are no longer exhorted to show *themselves* as Wiedemann (2011) has worked out from her analyses. Even without the use of real names or images, tracking of past activities, contacts and other details can be used to derive data of relevance to advertising.

As noted above, some of the platforms currently at the top of the popularity tree, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, are part of the Facebook consortium, minimising any impact of the loss of importance sustained by the Facebook platform between 2014 and 2016. We might, then, reconstruct from this the assertion that Facebook was able to release its hold on the front stage because it has doubly secured its position of back-stage power.

6 FINDINGS: THE PERMANENT PROGRESSION OF PLATFORMS FROM STATIC PROFILES TO DIVERSIFIED STREAM PORTFOLIO

In order to illustrate the key insights emerging from the before mentioned studies, I will compare two platforms: Facebook, and the currently highly popular „TikTok“ (on this platform’s success among young people in particular, cf. Reuter & Koeber, 2019). As outlined in the excursus, Facebook has lost its monopoly position and its use by young people in particular is limited; the aesthetic pattern of articulation the research reconstructed in its case is also in evidence on other platforms. I will pay specific attention here to the patterns of ‘bricolage’ and of the ‘mask’. Since 2010, social media sites such as Instagram and Pinterest have responded to the increase in posting of images online by centring their entire infrastructure on images, to which text is compelled to relate. A user’s profile picture plays only a subordinate role; in terms both of the platform’s structure and of the interaction that takes place on it, a multiplicity of other pictures comes

to dominate. These platforms diversify the possible range of communication via images by using image clusters and temporary, auto-deleting compilations of images ('stories'). Platforms such as Snapchat effectively go further by, first, permitting only the temporary showing of images, and second, facilitating the use of filters in such a way as to foreground the playful, carnivalesque mode (Levin, 2015). The first study discussed here focused its attention on Facebook profile pictures because of the special role they held within the platform architecture at that time. In contrast to Turkle's hope for the internet as a moratorium, Facebook has been, at that stage in its existence, not a network which permitted the cultivation of anonymous or fictional alter-egos or, arising from this, the testing out of different identities in a playful way (Boyd, 2014, p. 41). Other networks, such as those that accompany certain computer games, provided spaces for this type of usage as did Twitter (cf. Boyd, 2014, p. 204). On Facebook, the user's profile picture appeared as a frontispiece, as it often remained the first and for outsiders the only impression, and thus acted as a decodable condensation of world and self-perceptions (Flasche, 2017b, p. 272). Rigid invocations accompanied the upload process; within the entire corpus, only 7 percent of the users failed to post an image.

Structurally present neither in the media structure of the Facebook profile image nor in the platform's rigid identity politics, the carnivalesque mode nevertheless occurred, in clusters, within both of these entities, which points to the productive—in some cases subversively articulated—character of the profile image's empty space. The first study showed that young people in particular used bricolage (Flasche, 2017a) and masks (Flasche, 2020) to take a performatively intractable position against the order of visibility pre-formed in the platform. Counteracting the stage preset for them by the Facebook profile by setting backstage practices,⁷ they used external image processing programs to split their profile picture into individual images and to put several identities into one (Fig. 5.1).

In practising casual pictorial techniques, they refused the interpellations of Facebook's default settings, also reconstructed as governmental, which demanded they *show themselves in the best possible light* (Wiedemann, 2011; Flasche, 2018). The quantified analysis of profile pictures, conducted as part of the serial iconographic method referenced above (Flasche, 2017b), showed that these young people presented themselves primarily as *networks* of things, spaces and other actors, reminding of Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (1998). A key element of the self-representations in

Fig. 5.1 Sample image from the first study: Facebook profile photo (anonymised) © Viktoria Flasche

evidence in the images is the action-related dimension of connectivity in a twofold sense: first, on the level of the image itself, and, second, on the level of the platform on which the user posts the image so it might be immediately networked, linked and affixed with attributes such as hashtags as provided for in the platform's architecture (Flasche, 2017b; Schreiber & Kramer, 2016).

This analysis points to the practices that are currently dominant on TikTok, where soundtracks, miniature-dialogues, film clips and music sequences can be linked to a video usually recorded by users themselves. The app is the central medium for linking, saving, sharing and commenting on these videos. The typical view of this platform is a tiled view of a vertically running video web feed. The user sees a constantly moving and growing sequence of small vertically aligned rectangles. The very short videos (15 seconds maximum) published by the users appear in a display individually controlled via algorithms.⁸ As soon as one has created a profile, one will only see an individually created stream based on the previous personal activities. There is thus no “neutral” view that is equally available to all users. The display of the app's browser version, viewed without being logged into a profile, is personalised on the basis of the user's IP address. These “mini-mini-videos” establish a “temporary undertow by which

further activities are set in motion” (Porombka, 2016, p. 32). The videos enter into a particular relationship with affect and sensory corporeality: “They concentrate on [the representation of] faces, postures or movements that express anger, sadness, despair, resignation, devotion, love, excitement, disgust [...]. Because they do this in a loop, repeating the same expression and gesture over and over again, they have a particularly intense effect [...]” (ibid.). This leads to a flow experience, in which awareness and certainty about one’s own, present space-time-body structure evaporates and gives way to an affect-guided, almost magical “involvedness” (ibid.; Carnap & Flasche, 2020). The practices in action on TikTok show how the TikTok algorithm, which suggests music titles in various personalised categories, is centrally inscribed in the sound selection process and users’ mimetic desire. The user receives suggestions in several personalised feeds such as the ‘For You’ feed. The videos are placed algorithmically in an order that aims to generate increased length of stay and activity. This process usually remains hidden from users, that is, they receive no explicit information that it is taking place. This becomes particularly evident in the interviews, where references to popularity of content fail to differentiate between what the interviewees themselves *like* and what has received many “likes” from other users. Like an *amoeba* (ibid.), the algorithm only reveals itself to perception in changing manifestations. The metaphor of the amoeba illuminates the non-transparency and ungraspability of the algorithm’s operation to users; its limits, modes of operation and actions elude comprehension or description. This inconceivability obscures from gaining any knowledge as to their positioning in relation to the algorithm or indeed as to how they are positioning themselves. The transactional interviews showed that when users describe their creative processes, the boundaries between decisions taken by the algorithm and their actions remain unclear to them. The amoeba-like algorithm, as a changing mutant entity, constantly changing its form, protrudes into their practices, without them being able to describe it as such, because it constantly escapes their perception.

Alongside this, the DiKuJu study identified practices that significantly exceed the algorithmic decision-making process by recombining different genres such as videos, music snippets, comedy dialogues and games as well as different platforms, each with their specific structural logic. One example of this consists in videos co-created by young people together with their “online best friends” in the multiplayer game Minecraft, recording play by means of screen recording or with their smartphones. The formal

Fig. 5.2 Example from the second study: Compilation of screenshots from a TikTok video. © DiKuJu project

design of these videos contrasts with typical TikTok videos: The cuts are fast and fragile, the videos flicker and change abruptly in brightness and colour (*ibid.*). In picture quality, as in their plot and music, they reject the viewer's gaze and expectations almost aggressively. Transgression does not occur here as a process reflected on, due to the amoeba's elusion of comprehension, but instead as a collaborative interplay (see Fig. 5.2).

These practices on TikTok transcend the logics of individual platforms in an exuberant, explosive structure of forms and allow antagonistic gestures that transcend mere (innocent) "involvedness" (Porombka, 2016) and the "feelgood atmosphere" typical of TikTok (Reuter & Koeber, 2019).

7 CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMATIVE THEORY OF *BILDUNG*—AND POWERFUL ENTANGLEMENTS

This chapter ends with the open question of how, with regard to the studies' findings, we might comprehensively rethink media education in the light of their implications. If pedagogical endeavour seeks to create reflective distance or unfold critical and thus possibly creative potential, the insights into current media practices garnered by the studies pose the question as to how this might succeed when the object of such prospective

critique, that is, a distinct media format, is so elusive. Platforms and their constituent elements are no longer an object in an epistemological sound sense, but rather an entity that has always already been interwoven with the subject. In this sense, only a heuristic understanding can speak of media *use* here. This use of language, and of academic semantics, has left the terrain of neutrality and suggests a reading of media practices that cannot incorporate current developments such as so called “deep-learning”-algorithms (Jörissen, 2020, p. 348).

The selective longitudinal overview described in this chapter offers us a number of insights towards a response to this open question that does not, however, reach to a final conclusion. Despite their limited scope, the cases described provide indications that critical—although not necessarily reflective—potential arises where the platforms’ ‘protocol logics’ becomes visible to us, as explicit in the articulatory media practices of young people. This often happens in instances which confuse or ‘throw’ the viewer, disrupting their viewing habits. These videos are often difficult to watch, they flicker, they cut abruptly, their sequences are too short, they appear illogical to us by seemingly randomly combining sounds and images. This intractability arises as a function of our habitual and above all generational viewing habits. From an empirical perspective it is precisely in this moment of the viewer’s being ‘thrown’ that the potential arises to bring the visual and structural logics of the platforms forth out of their invisibility.⁹ We might classify such practices as critical in an *aesthetic-tentative* manner rather than in a *rational-reflective* form. Their potential for *Bildung* lies precisely in “expanding [our] scope for action and experience” (Richter & Allert, 2017, p. 251) and in not resolving conflicting positions, but keeping them open. Thus, the results of the longitudinal section do not point to the productivity of models of ‘digital literacy’ as presented in administrative educational contexts (Jörissen, 2020, p. 348). The reference of the empirical findings to previously formulated theoretical approaches suggests the utility of increased attention to what we might call the creative/tentative game in the context of current media practices, alongside the practice of reflective, critical distancing. Together, these ways of exploring invisible and flowing, constantly evolving protocol logics may show a way forward in education on this specific and crucial area of modern-day media. The consequence of this would be that media-pedagogical action would have to aim at opening up contexts in which deconstructive aesthetic strategies could be tested and in the best case even validated.

Concluding, I note that existing theoretical work towards a transformational theory of *Bildung* remains important and may also help guide us along this path. Richter and Allert (2017, p. 252) describe the range of dynamic educational processes in a digital culture as “poetic plays” that lead to productive entanglements. Koller attempts not only to think differently about the educational process, but also to refigure the educational process itself as “thinking differently” or “becoming different” (Koller, 2018, p. 9). In the theory of structural media education (Joerissen & Marotzi, 2009), this openness is built-in integrally where tentativity in particular appears as a decisive moment in educational processes: “Uncertainties must be given a place, better, several places in our thinking; then, and only then, will a tentative, experimental, replaying, testing, innovative, category-inventing, creative processing of experience become possible” (ibid., p. 21).

NOTES

1. The young people that are the subject of the work detailed in this chapter were aged 12–24 in the period of investigation, from 2013 to 2019, and therefore on the boundary between Generations Y and Z. Generation Y comprises the cohorts born between 1985 and 2000, whom a Deutsche Shell study (2002) described as the “pragmatic generation” in an age marked by uncertainty and upheaval. This generation, too, was centrally shaped by Rapid advances in information and communication technologies brought a decisive influence to bear on this generation; but it is only for those born after 2000, termed Generation Z, that the digitalisation of broad areas of life has been all-determining (Albert et al., 2019). Generation Z, also described as “iGen” (Twenge, 2017), is the first successor generation of the “digital natives”, for whom smart technologies and social media are ubiquitous features of daily life in a process of permanent change (Albert et al., 2019, p. 40).
2. ‘Education’ is an at best approximate rendering of the German concept of *Bildung* (Horlacher, 2016).
3. Full title: (Post-) Digital Cultural Youth Worlds—Development of New Methodological Instruments for the Development of Research on Arts and Cultural Education in the Digital and Post-Digital World/DiKuJu, research project funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research, 2016–2019, led by Prof Dr. B. Jörissen and Prof Dr. S. Keuchel (Joerissen et al., 2020).
4. All textbook translations by the author.

5. There are additionally micro-generational distinctions alongside the broader adult/non-adult divide. Analysis of group discussions from the DiKuJu study illuminates this phenomenon, with generational stratifications evident within the groups: the older participants (16–20) express surprise and concern at the behaviour of younger ones (12–16) in relation to Snapchat and there is no shared framework context as regards media and app use across the groups' age range of 12 to 25.
6. A "Barcamp" is originally a conference method from the field of technology research. As a so-called *unconference*, the BarCamp has no predefined talks or workshop topics, but is rather designed in a collaborative manner by the participants themselves. For the survey in the context of the DiKuJu project, a three-day BarCamp on the topic of "Who are we?", attended by 46 young people, was held at the Academy for Cultural Education of the German Federal Government and the State of North Rhine-Westphalia in Remscheid. (Joerissen et al., 2020).
7. 'Backstage practices' are those activities that are not likely to be carried into *public* space or the *front* stage. In the context of these images, they are motifs which do not 'stage' or 'present' the user, such as blurred snapshots taken in front of a bathroom mirror (Flasche, 2018).
8. The default settings allow only videos with a maximum length of 15 seconds. These presets can be fine-tuned to allow up to 60 seconds. However, the majority of videos are aligned with the 15 seconds.
9. A similar effect can be observed where users try to subversively place censored political messages on TikTok. A famous example, which can now be found on YouTube, would be Feroza Aziz's critique of Chinese policy towards the Uighurs, which she recorded in the style of a make-up video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcqfCgCCLDk>; last accessed 12.07.2020).

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