1. Introduction

Printed in blue, the athletic body holds a hammer aloft in one hand ready to strike a blow to the sword that is held by the other. The icon is framed by a red circle and surrounded by a quote from the bible. The black letters read: “turn swords in to ploughshares” (see figure 1). Printed on cloth and sewn on jackets, this symbol was worn by people in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), who were longing for peace amidst the confrontation of two blocs (Silomon 1999). The model for the blue figure is a statue that was created by Yevgeny Vuchetich, a highly decorated representative of Soviet Realism, and donated to the United Nations by the Soviet Union in 1959 (see figure 2). It takes no wonder to see that this icon used to be a positive reference point for the countries of the Warsaw pact. They used it in their apologetic defense of the Soviet world as a guarantor of peace. However, when the patch was widely distributed in activities of the Protestant church against the military training of GDR students in the early 1980s, the government forbade wearing the symbol to prevent “misuse”. As a reaction to this, peace activists cut out the print and continued to wear the patch presenting the void to the public.

The story of the allegory of peacefulness elucidates the power of visual codes in the struggles that social movements are engaged in. Challenging the status quo movements depend on a public display of their claims. As they are notoriously poor in resources, lacking direct access to mass media and institutional decision-making, social movements take to the streets and other available arenas to make themselves heard. In this environment, their messages are doomed to die away if they are too complex. Anger, critique, and hope that breed protest have therefore always been condensed in visual codes. Like other domains of cultural production, the visible is a field in which meaning is produced and contested. As part of their social and political engagement, social movement actors shape the visual realm to promote their cause and gain leverage. Allies, counter-movements, authorities and mass media transform or challenge these visual codes according to their agenda.

Enshrined in the use and alleged misuse of the allegory of peacefulness, we discover a complex part of 20th century contentious history. The episode tells us about the exposure of Soviet authoritarianism to protest and attempts to control,
about the exploration of ways to express grievances in repressive regimes and about the central role of visual codes in contentious politics. Peace groups in Eastern Germany acted in a precarious context. Cultural and political engagement was channeled in state-led institutions rendering independent public meetings illegitimate. Churches turned out to be the only arenas that were at the same time public and relatively autonomous of state intervention; but the opportunities to express dissent outside church rooms were limited. Copying text, for instance, was virtually impossible without risking prosecution. Printing on textile was one of the few loopholes. In this situation, the patches showing the soviet statue served as a way to express dissent with the official policy in the public. As peacefulness was part of the official state image, the use of the icon resonated with the cultural background of the GDR doxa. It incorporated both soviet propaganda and a protestant pacifist heritage. However, in a situation were church officials challenged the concept of para-military education and military service the adaptation of the official imagery by peace activists added a new connotation that made it intolerable for the authorities. Soviet imagery became contested. The reinterpretation of the icon turned it into a symbol of a formerly invisible front. Peace activists wore the patch as a sign of their conviction and to denounce state repression. The authorities were confronted with sublimé critique that gained visibility in the public space. In their view, they had to get rid of the icon. However, the ban proved to be a two-edged remedy. Even after removing it, the image of the sword turned into a ploughshare questioned the credibility of state socialism.

Despite the obvious significance of the visual realm, the analysis of social movements has not devoted much energy to discover it systematically. With this paper we want to show that omitting the visual aspects in the articulation of social movements has produced a gap that needs to be filled. As a first step we discover the potential of visual studies as part of the analysis of social movements. Then, we take a look at the literature that has analyzed visual codes in the domains of visual media studies, cultural studies and gender theory. Finally, we propose "visual frames" as a possible concept to analyze the visual production of social movements and their interaction with reference groups which they challenge. This concept is then applied to the image production of the feminist "riot grrrls".

2. Tracing Visual Codes in Social Movement Analysis

A look at the literature dealing with social movements shows that the use of symbols and the importance of visual expression have been referred to over and over again. The first issue of the German Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen that was founded to foster discussion between activists, politicians and social movement scholars made the symbolical expression of movements the main focus. The preface praised symbols as “part of the dynamic” and a “proof of life” (Leif 1988: 8) of social movements. However, most of the actual scholarly work dealing with movement imagery has been rather superficial. The reasons for this shortcoming are manifold. Like other domains in the social sciences, social movement analysis has been focusing on textual sources in the form of manifestos, leaflets, websites, newspaper articles or interviews. In this context, images are conceived of as an illustration of the textual message rather than a medium following its own logic and containing a specific message. The perspective and the instruments developed by scholars of visual studies have never been applied systematically to social movements and the protest events they launch. By and large, visual aspects of social reality are evaded in the methodological toolkit of researchers. While methods to study different forms of text are highly advanced, conceptual offers how to interpret visual information have not been made in (or applied to) social movement research. As a consequence of the fixation to text, visual studies are a special subject rather than a fundament in the formation of young scholars even though a systematic analysis of visual material could enrich the classical agenda of social movement research. Another reason for the neglect of visual codes is the fact that social movements developed a logocentric culture at least in those countries were movement research was blossoming. For great parts of the old and new left the visual was more or less regarded as an illustration of textual messages. In that sense, social movement research mirrored the social reality of the object under study.

Since the mid 1990s, movement scholars have devoted more and more energy to the analysis of cultural aspects of social movements (for an overview see Williams 2004). In the wake of this “cultural turn” scholars also turned to the visual aspects of social movements. In her account of women producing arpilleras, appliqué pictures in cloths, Jacqueline Adams points out that analyzing a visual medium enriches the main strands of social movement research: “movements can use art to carry out framing work, mobilize resources, communicate information about themselves, and, finally,
as a symbol of the movement” (2002: 22). Indeed, the context and identity of movements, their framing work and proliferation of messages (see separate section below) have been analyzed with reference to images.

The visual representation of movements allows understanding the context of movement activity and the dynamic interaction with authorities, mass media, and the audience. Images are part the struggle about meaning. As such the handling of images is part of the attempt to (a) understand or interpret a movement and (b) to either co-opt or de-legitimize and demobilize social movements. Kathrin Fahlenbrach (2002) has shown that especially mass media need to connect diffuse and complex protest movements with images that visualize their messages. Not only do these media images provide orientation to uninvolved citizens but also activists readapt to the public image of the movement they are part of.

The analysis of images has to some extend been applied to the display of a collective identity. On the one hand visual codes underline the connection between activists and they express the attachment to a certain movement. On the other hand, they make a movement and its adherents recognizable to outsiders. On a very basic level, this function is met by colors. In the common understanding red, green, brown and pink refer instantly to the labor, ecologist, national socialist and the gay movement. The use of these colors is contested as they are a marker to discern the in-group from the out-group (Sawer 2007). In their analysis of a tripartite protest march against the joint summit of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in Prague 1999, Chesters and Welsh (2004) reconstruct the role of colors attached to each protest march for an emerging collective identity of protesters with a common action repertoire. As Fahlenbrach (2002) shows for the German students’ movement of the 1960s processes of collective identity building are not only mediated via visual self-representation but also oriented by their reflection in the mass media. In a more abstract way, Jesus Casquete (2003) has defined the act of taking the streets to build a collective body as a visualization of a collective identity. Researchers working on the most recent waves of protest in the women’s, gay and lesbian movements have noted the impact of images for the rethinking of identity and collective memory within social movements (Halberstam 2007; Engel 2007).

Exploring the visual expression of social movements seems particularly important when it comes to transnational protest events and processes, where actors can not necessarily rely on a shared language. The EuroMayday Parade against precarity, for instance, was able to diffuse its claims through the invention of a sophisticated visual protest iconography that was disseminated via ICT and independent media (Mattoni 2006, Doerr & Mattoni 2007a). In a transnational perspective also national cultural traditions appear on the screen as a factor that hampers a common deciphering of visual codes. Nowadays, movement activists seem to arrange images more consciously. On the one hand this may go back to a general analysis of images getting more and more important to transport ideas (see Mitchell 1994, ch. 1; Mirzoeff 1999). On the other hand, visual representations are at the center of a media strategy that to a certain extent adapts to the needs of mass media (cf. Rucht 2004). Contemporary movements have started to use the internet as an additional transnational public sphere to compensate for the difficulties of transnational exchange. Virtual communication, protest activities and applications foster a common identity across borders. Thus, visual tools and icons of protest can be regarded as an important medium and an “immaterial resource” to mobilize for protest (Doerr & Mattoni 2007a; see McCarthy and Zald 1977) and to find a common language. Visual codes gain significance particularly in social networks of activists who are consciously engaged in creating and imagining themselves not only in text but through visual tools as employed in online and street protests, direct action and performances or exhibitions (Mattoni 2007, von Osten 2005). It is important to note however, that the ability to create and diffuse visual tools of protest is limited depending on the cultural and social capital of groups and individuals (Doerr & Mattoni 2007a).

3. Introducing the visual turn into social movement studies

The analysis of images within social movements does not have to start from the scratch. Since the 1980s scholars from various disciplines have underlined the importance of the visual realm pleading for an “iconic turn” (Mitchell 1994) or “pictorial turn” (Boehm 1994). Works from art history and other domains have referred to „visual culture as a field of
knowledge” (Rogoff 1998) and understood the circulation of images as a means of collective meaning production, thus an intrinsically political process. In recent years, the proliferation of images in an emerging global visual culture has been discussed by art historians, cultural and gender theorists.

Sociologists, political scientists, and historians have hesitated to engage in the debate focusing on images. However, claims for a recognition of visual studies in political sciences have been made (Burkhardt 2005), methods for such an analysis have been proposed (Müller 2003) and scholars started to build an archive of political images (Drechsel 2005). Conceding different degrees of autonomy to images in their relation to text, they have discovered the role of visual codes in global conflicts and in political leader’s assertion of legitimacy (Münkler, Olesen 2007, Holert 2000). Still, the explicit political content of images is an understudied aspect of visual culture and systematic empirical studies in this field are rare.

While political scientists lamented a decline of classical forms of political engagement, scholars in visual studies pointed at the creation and transformation of visual representations as a way to intervene politically1 (see Holert 2000, Mirzoeff 1998). While those in power create and manipulate images to fortify their position, the first step for challengers is to gain visibility by producing instances of self-representation. In this field, a lively exchange between research, art and activism has emerged. Feminism, queer studies and studies on migration (Holert 2000, Holert et al. 2006, Engel 2007, Cantaluppi & Aus dem Moore 2007; Steyerl 2002, von Osten 2005, Cantaluppi, Reis & Voswinckel 2007) have contributed to the establishment of visual culture as an area of research in the Anglo-Saxon and European context. Activists in feminist, queer or labor related networks built independent visual iconographies and memories of protest apart from mainstream media with reference to visual theory. At the same time thinkers of visual culture were inspired by artist and activist interventions in the emerging transnational exchange of images via ICT (e.g. Rogoff 1998).2 Studies on visual culture critically discuss the potential of strategies of visualization that aim at creating visibility for groups and persons that are excluded or marginalized within public discourse (Holert 2000). The limits of these image policies from below have been identified by scholars of theory of science, women and gender studies. Exploring the example of novel image technologies in the field of medicine, they point at the ambivalently “powerful” and fragile quality of images to create contingent “evidences”, thereby undermining feminist image claims from the Sixties and Seventies (Treichler et al. 1998) and producing “incalculable ‘effects of representation’” (Holert 2000:23; cf. Marin). Although the struggle for visibility is an obvious feature of social movement activity it has been absent in the theoretical canon of social movement research.

Approaches to study visuality are an important toolbox for the study of images in collective action, as they do not only critically reflect on diffusion processes and limitations of image use. They also focus on both actors in the process of image diffusion and institutional practices. For the purpose of this paper, we understand visuality as a space in which challengers confront the establishment and provoke reactions. These interactions produce specific visualizations of power that are contingent in time and space (see Mirzoeff 1998: p. 8, Mirzoeff 2000).

4. Towards an analysis of visual frames

To concretize how the analysis of the visual realm can add to existing studies of collective action we propose to study images as vehicles of framing processes. In the wake of Snow and Benford’s introduction of frame analysis into social movement studies (Snow et al. 1986, Snow & Benford 1988) important theoretical and empirical work has been done to establish this method in the field (for an overview see Benford & Snow 2000). In the footsteps of Goffman’s ethnomethodological analysis the concept of frame refers to “schemata of interpretations” that “enable individuals [to] locate, perceive and identify occurrences within their life space and the world at large” (Snow et al. 1986: 464). However, the potential of Goffman’s ethnomethodological approach that included an analysis of visual representations in everyday life (Sztompka 2007, Goffman 1963) has not been explored sufficiently in most of the work that applies frame analysis to social movements; while psychological approaches have indeed been developing the method of visual frame analysis on behalf of the scheme theories that also had influenced Goffman’s work on framing (see Müller 2003: 174; Goffman 1974). The framing approach that introduced the analysis of cultural artifacts into the analysis of social
movements was received in a rationalist tradition (Ferree 1992). Thus, frame analysis continues to focus on textual frames in speeches or written documents. The ‘visual languages of protest’, by contrast, are rarely taken into account. Knowing about criticism of frame analysis saying that it has failed to reflect on the vehicles of framing (Adams 2002, McAdam 1996), this is not a strange result. Considered that those few empirical case studies referring to the imagery of protest (e.g. Reiter 2006 for the labor movements) show how the visual realm mirrors changing frames and social and political change across time, the neglect of images in research is significant. The world view of social movements is not only enshrined in speeches, manifestos and email-lists but it is also visible in the design of posters and t-shirts, in the use of visual symbols and in photos that are used for campaigning.

As images serve as a medium that may represent complex messages, visual codes may play a significant role in the framing work of social movements. In her analysis of Chilean arpilleras Adams underlines three framing functions of the art pieces: to depict the bad conditions of life in Chile, to portray the antagonist as evil and to convey an alternative way of thinking (2002: 33-39). Lahusen (1996) devotes a significant part of his study of public campaigns to the use of visual media in general and the logos of campaigns and organizations in particular. Several authors have pointed at the condensation of movement messages in media images. As “news icons” (Bennett & Lawrence 1995, Szasz 1994) images can be used as a reference to social problems as they are seen by social movements. They may also replace proper arguments in the sense of “argumentative fragments” (Delicath & deLuca 2003). However, the example of news icons shows that movements may try to use images as a Trojan horse to convey their messages, but they still depend on mass media in the formation and dissemination of visual codes (see also Gamson et al. 1992, Fahlenbrach 2002).

As indicated above, these images are circulated into the public sphere to uphold a collective identity, to assert a group’s presence and to influence different target groups (see Rucht & Kretschmer 1988: 9f.). When studying the response of established actors within the media and political system towards collective action, frame analysis allows working out similarities and differences in the interpretation of reality and the interactions between mainstream media and activists’ self-produced identifications. In this sense, researchers have related the success of mobilization to frame resonance with potential movement allies and a cultural common sense. Processes of frame bridging or frame alignment and frame extension in the interactions between movements and/or other groups within the wider public sphere have also been at the center of research interest (Gerhards & Rucht 1992: 572, Snow et al. 1986). Lastly, frame diffusion is an aspect of the framing work of movements that presupposes an analysis of the proliferation of images in a multilayered and multimedia public sphere.

Frame resonance

Frames are considered likely to be effective when they are connect to the knowledge of the target group or tap common sense interpretations of reality. In this respect, visual frames are certainly different from textual frames insofar as textual frames follow a rational logic: they have to be plausible and consistent (Benford & Snow 2000: 619-622). Visual frames, by contrast, follow another logic. They do not appeal to rational argument but to emotions and recognition of a shared visual knowledge, e.g. national symbols or commercial visual language. Thus, images are closely connected to what has been called cultural resonance. In his history of the abolitionist movement John Oldfield (1995) has related the image of a kneeling slave that was used and distributed by abolitionists to Christian imagery. Showing the slave as a human being in a posture resembling the devout European activists tried to evoke commonality between residents of the metropolises and slaves. Cultural resonance gets more complicated when images are transferred to different cultural contexts. The chances and limits of visual codes to transfer meaning across border have become evident in the EuroMayday parade. The icons of protest produced in this campaign diffused successfully to some countries and activist milieus while failing in others (Doer & Mattoni 2007a, 2007b). Another feature of images that textual frames are lacking is their evidence. They are intuitively plausible without further explanation. Even though receivers know that images are susceptible to manipulation, they are commonly taken for granted. This is why TV news is considered more credible than printed information.
Frame diffusion

Frames are not fixed to the context in which they emerge. They are also transferable to other contexts may they be geographically distant or differ in cultural terms. Very obviously this characteristic is applicable to both text and images. Processes of frame diffusion and re-adaptation into different local and national contexts are dependent on factors such as cultural and geographic proximity, personal networks and political and discursive opportunity structures (della Porta 1999). These transfer processes might take place directly (unmediated) or indirect (mediated) and pathways of diffusion (Soule 2004: 295, 1997; Collier & Messick 1975; della Porta & Kriesi 1999) and involve different actors (transmitters, adopters and brokers) and procedural steps (Soule 2004, 1997). However, in the analysis of frame diffusion the role of images has largely been neglected. This is a shortcoming, in particular when it comes to explain "non-relational" or indirect channels of diffusion that depend only "on a minimal identification of adopter and transmitter" (McAdam & Rucht 1993: 60). In his analysis of the diffusion of self-immolation, Michael Biggs has even shown that the circulation of the image showing a Vietnamese monk in blaze via mass media has fostered the diffusion of this action form to people who were disconnected from the original actor (Biggs 2003). In this case there was no personal connection between individuals who burned themselves. The often discussed "power of images" to create affection, attachment (or disgust) (Müller 2003, Boehm 2007) might at least partly compensate for the lack of direct interpersonal linkages and a high level of identification that has been considered crucial to diffuse “social movement ideology, symbols and tactics” indirectly (Soule 2004: 296, 297, McAdam & Rucht 1993)). Thus, an analysis of the use of visual frames might also help to understand agency that has been identified as another gap in the understanding of frame diffusion processes (Snow & Benford 1999).

Visual frames and the response of movement environments

The environments a social movement reacts with perceive it first and foremost via images that are transported by mass media. Not only the general image but also the visual frames that are circulated by social movement activists are subject to processes of reception and adaptation that are contingent and beyond control for activists. The response of movement environments to the visual frames that are proffered can take different forms and it does not have to be uniform. Symbols of rebellion, for instance, might be rejected by the church or a conservative party, they might even be incriminated by the judiciary; but at the same time liberal parts of society might interpret these symbols positively and advertising agents might even harness them to commercial ends. However, we would distinguish four types of reactions to activists’ frames:

1. Rejection – frames are conceived as illegitimate and incompatible with the hegemonic value system (e.g.: prohibition of symbols used by terrorist or totalitarian groups: swastika, symbol of the RAF (i.e. Red Army Fraction)
2. Containment/Distance - frames are accredited at least some legitimacy but rejected based on more important validity claims (e.g. Symbols of the peace movement: Picasso’s dove, turn swords into plowshares)
3. Appropriation: frames are re-integrated at the surface while being (partly) emptied of their subversive core. This form of frame procession is often accompanied by commodification (e.g. picture of Ché Guevara taken by Alberto Korda).
4. Integration: visual frames are adapted not only superficially but integrated at a more substantial level (albeit possibly de-politicized). They are considered as representing the hegemonic value system (e.g. the color green as a symbol of the environmental movement).

The boundaries between re-appropriation and frame integration are fluent and not easy to draw: a first criteria of distinction in between both might be that an integrated frame would be established as a new value within the dominant cultural system while an appropriated frame would be the appropriation of a frame surface, that is accompanied by the continuous rejection of its core value. An example for such an in-between case of re-appropriation and integration is the response by the film and media industry towards second wave feminism that Hilary Radner (2007) discusses in the examples of conventional romance genres in the 1980s and contemporary cinema like Pretty Woman (1989) and Legally Blonde (2001): “Far from rescinding the principles of Second Wave Feminism, these “girly films” embrace certain feminist principles, while rejecting others, often those Feminists hold most dear” (ibid). To study the specific ways in
which adaptation might work, visual frame analysis has to study such processes systematically and explore images from below and above, their similarities and differences in a comparative way. Considered this ambivalent interplay of movements and environments, visual frame analysis should ask not only how frames get integrated or re-appropriated but also how movements succeed in rebuilding their frames in order to express their continuing disagreement with dominant framings and to point out excluded subjectivities and radical speaking positions (Melucci & Avritzer 2000; Mouffe 2000). To grasp this dynamic, frames should be studied in a diachronic way (Ervamaa 2005, della Porta 2005).

5. Methodological challenges

The study of complex visual communication processes (even more so if they include interaction across borders) cannot go alone. It requires detailed work on text, interviews and ethnographic process analysis. Combining the interpretation of visual and textual material might allow to study diffusion in depth, asking which vehicle (visual or textual) might be actually effective to transport a frame (Oliver & Myers 2000) in different contexts (direct or indirect, domestic or transnational, intra-movement or general public). The analysis of visual media can borrow from the advanced techniques developed in art history to study particular iconic images and the analysis of images as embedded structures produced by actors in institutional contexts of production and diffusion. A systematic comparison considering both textual and visual frames would help to figure out their differences and similarities, culturally specific codes of meaning and mobilization potential.

Three layers of analysis: media, time, and space

Research on image frames should include three dimensions: media, time and space. On the level of media, one can study differences and similarities, diffusion processes and actors within different activist, broker and mainstream media: how are images ‘from below’ diffused, transformed within the mainstream or everyday life? In which institutional practices are they embedded, and which are the transmitters, brokers and recipient that they interact with? Secondly, taking the dimension of time, images can be studied in a diachronic analysis tracing back their diffusion across specific protest waves. Thirdly, at the level of space, we can study the cross-national diffusion of visual frames. The stronger or weaker diffusion between groups or countries – as related to difficulties of translation of locally specific and contingent visual iconographies can help to further theorise the fitting of political and discursive opportunity structures and the conditions of scale shift.

In sum, at each level of comparison, the goal is to figure out the mechanisms and processes of social transformation and the role of images as possible triggers, barriers or media of change. In a detailed process analysis, image production, diffusion and reception might be analyzed by the means of in-depth interviews with activists, journalists and other actors involved. The study of image reception is more difficult an area of research (Müller 2003). However, for the study of collective action it is most relevant to understand the mechanisms through which images mobilize groups and individuals. Interested in how images are interpreted by different groups, we propose to build on an existing sociological methods on visual framing that were developed to be used for narrative interviewing by Meinhof & Galasinski (2000). They used particular iconic images in trans-cultural border regions to study memory, conflict and identity formation within social groups.

6. Case study: Feminist Counter Images and the Visual Establishment

In order to demonstrate the suggested approach in relation to the study of activist images and the mainstream, we will retrace the constant interactions between counter images and their commercial counterparts in the example of feminist image politics. We assume that homogenising and heterogenising elements stand in a constant dialogue within visual culture (Mirzoeff 1998). We will take a closer look at the public spaces of low budget DIY activism and the everyday life of activists. The images that are produce here to be circulated through independent media. Once emitted to these alternative public spaces the images interact with mainstream media and wider public discourses (see Mirzoeff 1998: 24). Art and aesthetic activism are considered here as a key level of analysis of the “delicate cultural work” in which
cultural codes are transformed (Bronfen 2002; Rogoff 1998). Nurtured by theoretical work on dominant discourses and imagery related to the body, sex and gender, artistic work within the feminist movement is done to counter sexist and racist clichés within mass media. Considering Aby Warburg’s theory of image, the study of interactions between activist and established iconographies may shed light on the agency of images and their “energia” (cf. Assmann 2006; Müller 2003) as a mobilizing function that can be re-activated across time. Our case study on feminist iconographies tries to explore this.

Today’s feminist mobilizations and transnational networks can be described as a movement in re-imagining facing the redemption and rejection of its claims by the dominant value system within the “post-feminist context” of neo-liberalism (McRobbie 2007). Angela McRobbie shows for contemporary societies and popular culture in Western Europe and North America that feminist struggles are trapped in a “double entanglement” by the dominant heterosexist value system. Firstly, feminism risks to be “taken into account in order that it can be disavowed as no longer necessary” (McRobbie 2007: 2). Secondly, given that feminism does not seem to be an option for many young women today (Scharff 2007), the post-feminist condition at the level of media images in the “popular feminine domain” evokes a “gender melancholia” and “illegible rage” among young women (McRobbie 2007: 1). What makes the new emergence of feminist and queer mobilization more complicated in this ambivalent situation is that this ambivalent acceptance by the establishment makes them subject to stigmatization by other strands of social movements. Feminists, gays and lesbians are blamed as being part of the neo-liberal conspiracy (Woltersdorff 2006). In this complicated discourse situation within the mainstream media, queer and media theorists have started to work on images as another media to bring the gender problem back (Halberstam 2007, Engel 2007). While these discussions are taking place, the established image production seems to have incorporated and adapted feminist, queer and transgender aesthetics for instance in the form of advertisement.

Firstly, this constellation shows, that images play an important role in the interaction of movements with the mainstream popular and public culture. To feminist thinkers images are sites of a struggle for meaning and vehicles to mobilize the younger generation. Secondly, the specific mobilizing potential of images is transferable over space and time. They are exchanged transnationally and between different generations. They might even re-emerge after periods of latency (see Assmann 2006). Finally, the contestational though dialogical interactions between what feminists fight as ‘neo-liberal malestream’ and activist counter-images can be studied only by a combined visual and textual frame analysis.

The Broken Hymen: Re-Interpreting feminism in the Grrrl zines network

The Grrrl zine network emerged in 2001 as a virtual re-imagining of riot grrrl movements that had emerged in the early Nineties out of the alternative and punk music scene in the United States. The Grrrl zine network is part of a wider transnational activist-fanzine network in the milieu of third wave feminism, queer and transgender activism. The website www.grrrlzines.net was built in 2001 by the Austrian, former US based activist Elke Zobl with the goal to create a “global feminist network taking back the media” as it reads on the website: "The overall goal for the website is to share resources on grrrl zines in different languages, and to create connections between like-minded but often far-away feminist youth who read and produce zines.” The Grrrl zine network is linked virtually through the homepage and through ‘real’ face-to-face interactions of activists in micro “exhibition public spaces” (von Osten 2005) and within transnational circulating Ladyfest-subsutrcles. In 2007, its archive comprised about 1000 feminist-oriented fanzines from over 30 countries in 12 languages and online resources about feminist organizations, art, popular culture, and music projects, books, videos, journalistic and academic writing on grrrl zines. Images and covers of zines from Africa, North America, and the Middle East are available on the homepage together with interviews and writing of artists and academics.
The interesting in the Grrlzines network, its website and similar sites is that they emerged only several years after the Riotgrrrl movement had its peak. Thus, we have here a process of late cross-national diffusion of a movement that transports alternative images of womanhood and gender through independent media. Activists, artists and media activists are trying to re-imagine their radical content after Riotgrrrl was declared dead, due to its appropriation by mainstream fashion and film industries (Radner 2007). Nevertheless, feminist and queer activists continue developing images and the look of the movement further. In this context, the production of zines is conceived of as a “sort of self-empowering through the creation of media independent from mainstream representation of sexist and heteronormative cultures” in the understanding of the zine activists linked within this network and their DIY ethic, visuality plays a crucial role merely through the multiplicity and ambiguity it evokes as a media. The visual styles of self-produced zines show a non-heterosexual iconography and collective identity building process with a quality different from text. We will briefly discuss this for an image in one of the zines in the archive, “Broken Hymen” (see figure 3).

To understand this image and its effects properly, visual frame analysis would explore its production, reception and contextualization. As we do not have the space to do this here, we limit our analysis to the picture itself and the visual language it evokes. The image transgresses the visual frames relevant within second wave feminism and 1970s art that stressed the autonomy of women and their distance vis-à-vis mainstream aesthetics. Broken Hymen, by contrast, borrows from sexist imagery and deconstructs it by creating ambivalence. This also distinguishes the visual medium from texts and interviews on the homepage in which activists would utter their critique in a direct way.
On the iconic level, the image plays with dominant heterosexist imagery as circulated in commercial mass media illustrations, advertisement and common body language: A playful gesture, reference to sexuality in the predator-patterned decoration, and mimics that imitate the visual language of advertisement. However, the sexualized styling in make-up, dressing and accessories is slightly overemphasized and disturbed through the mock glance into a riot grrrl zine and the tattoo. The “naive” theatrical gaze of women in commercial advertisements addressing housewives of past decades is imitated in a way that alludes to a non-stereotypical female performativity and thus a subtle feminist position: the woman seems to enjoy her sexy dress which does not stop her from reading radical feminist zines like Broken Hymen.

On the textual level the subtitle, “not for your typical housewife”10, ridicules the consumer of sexist imagery. The “you” might address the male spectator for whom the sexist iconography typically is produced (see Rogoff 1998). At the same time it underlines the independence of the portrayed woman from the attributes of housewives that are cited on the iconic level. The image subverts the queer gaze usually applied by fashion images to reveal the lust of female consumers (McRobbie 2007): beyond a dominant heterosexual gaze, it leaves open who is desired and who may desire (see Engel 2007; Voswinckel 2007).

In a diachronic perspective we find the picture embedded within an exchange of new and old, deviant and commercial images in a collective visual memory. As a reframing of sexist commercial iconography, the image can be classified as a post-feminist or third wave feminist response to second wave feminism. Sexist iconography is not rejected directly but defeated in a more complex visual narrative. Moreover, the heterosexist gaze becomes re-appropriated and at the same time disturbed. The name of the zine, “Broken Hymen”, adds a radical tone of pride, despite the criticized backlash within the “post-feminist context” of neo-liberalism (see McRobbie 2007).

Activist work with images can be seen as strategies of re-imagining community and of building social networks in phases of low or latent mobilization. This process of contamination in action (della Porta and Mosca 2007) that has been equally observed in other left libertarian strands of contemporary movements. Both through virtual and ‘real’ spaces apart from the mainstream, activist media like the riot grrrl archive travel across countries and become an intermediary media between transmitters and adopters that attract and potentially infect people with feminist ideas. Images prove to be an important medium where this process of contamination takes place.

7. Conclusion

Producing and manipulating visual codes is an important field of social movement activity. Images are emitted to movement environments and processed, transformed and challenged by different actors such as allies, counter-
movements, authorities and mass media. However, the relevance of images remains an understudied aspect of social movement analysis.

In this article we have argued for a systematic introduction of visual studies into the analysis of social movements. Taking frame analysis as an example, we have shown that the study of images complements the existing approaches of social movement theory in an important way. Visual studies provide us with a methodological and conceptual toolbox in the effort to analyze the role of visual media in political communication. The study of images seems to be even more important under conditions in which images play a crucial role in the interpretation of reality. Moreover, protest organizers seem to rely increasingly on the language of images both in transnational and domestic contexts.

While textual media rely on rationality as a resource, images appeal to emotions and they are attributed evidence. A comparative approach including images and text opens the opportunity to understand which vehicles used by social movements are effective to gain leverage and in which way the imagination of a counter culture is received and processed by the challenged establishment.

Our case study on the re-imagination of Riotgrrl and images within the Grrlzines network has demonstrated this in a period of entanglement of feminist discourses by the dominant value system. Firstly, images are sites of struggles for meaning with a contingent outcome. They play an important role in the interaction of movements with the mainstream popular culture aiming at the mobilization of formerly uninvolved citizens. Secondly, the specific provocative and affective mobilizing potential of images is transferable over time and space. Thus, images might re-emerge transnationally and intergenerationally after periods of absence from public display.

References


Doerr, Nicole; Mattoni, Alice. 2007b. Discussing images and gender within the movement against precarity in Italy. In Feminist Review, forthcoming special issue on the precarity discourse in Italy (ed. by N. Puwar).


Endnotes

1 In a virtual transcultural environment this applies to interactive offers labeled as web 2.0 such as YouTube or Myspace.
2 Examples are the conferences Queer Alliances in Warsaw 2006 and the workshop on New Images of Precarity within Documenta 2007 in Kassel.
3 Interestingly, despite different epistemological and ontological assumptions, art history and visual culture approaches overlap at various layers. As an example, Gottfried Boehm coming from philosophy and art history claims that the culturally shaped body and gender must be at the centre of a visual analysis of power (2007). Starting from cultural and gender studies, Iris Rogoff (1998) arrives at a similar research agenda suggesting not only to analyze exclusion but also to question speech positions of the researcher herself within a framework of transcultural comparison of translation and mediating processes.
4 Suggestion by Isabelle de Keghel.
5 A part of feminist activists in Western Europe and Northern America have been blaming the current political and cultural climate as 'backlash' in a melancholic idealization of the sixties and seventies as period of radical change, others work on a relativisation and globalization of feminist memory theory against Western particularization of feminist memory (see Harrison 2005, Mohanty 2003).
8 Self-description of Grrrlzines.net. see http://www.grrrlzines.net; accessed at 1.7.2007.