

Headshot into Reality

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On April 11, 1968, Rudi Dutschke was the victim of an attempted assassination. He was shot three times: one bullet hit his right cheek, another his shoulder, and the third one his head. Before Dutschke fell to the ground, he staggered a few meters and, according to witnesses, uttered the words: “Mother, father,” “I have to get my hair cut,” and “Soldiers, soldiers.” The wounded man finally removed his wristwatch and took off his shoes. Dutschke is seriously injured. Later, in the hospital, a brain surgeon removed the bullet from his head. Initially, the eloquent ideologist and politician cannot speak, and he first learns to read and write again with the aid of his son during his subsequent convalescence. Still confined to his hospital bed, his wife asked him if he knows who Lenin is, and his answer is “No!”

There is hardly a more massive and destructive attack to the control center of human thought, feeling, and action. Precisely because Dutschke survived, he sets a frightening example for the fatal consequences of violence and the fragility and vulnerability of the body and consciousness. Before losing consciousness, simple images emerge that are put into words (“Mother, father,” “I have to get my hair cut,” “Soldiers, soldiers”), and he performs actions that could not be more commonplace (removing his watch, taking off his shoes). In the face of death, Dutschke neither announces the victory of the revolution, nor does he clench his fist as a symbol of his resistance.

This fictitious image could have become a myth. But this form of glorification did not exist for Dutschke. The contrary was the case. At the moment of his physical and psychical trauma, the man who promoted the analysis and critique of society in a complex and dense language and who tenaciously reinforced his argumentative ingenuity through his nearly obsessive reading of all of the important political and philosophical theories could only call out for his mother and father or state—completely irrational in light of the situation—that he had to get his hair cut. The utterance “Soldiers, soldiers” can at best be understood in the context of attack, shooting, and war, and can be regarded as a speculative moment of revolutionary furor. Personal fragments of consciousness were more obvious: the memory of his parents, which was perhaps associated with the regressive desire to seek protection in the arms of those who bore and raised him, or the necessity of getting his hair cut as the ideal of being able to be absorbed in a safe, secure, and harmless everyday life.

People who are injured and under shock frequently tend to perform everyday actions or utter irrelevant questions and concerns. The bleeding man who has just been run over by a car struggles to his feet and looks for his shoe; the mother of a seriously injured child is compelled to lock her bicycle and tend to the grocery bags; the heart-attack patient looks for his wallet; etc. That Dutschke removes his wristwatch and shoes fits into this pattern, perhaps even the desire to go to the haircutter. Dutschke serves as a striking, publicly documented example of the loss of control and the dissolution of apparently irrevocable capabilities. Language, determination, the ability to act, the power to make decisions, situative relation, but also identity and social role are lastingly relativized by a physical attack. In an existential state of emergency, the only remaining possibility for articulation is the unconscious

foundation of daily existence and reference to trivial, conventional operations.

Death, whether violent, due to illness, or ostensibly natural, time and again raises the question of life's parameters and values, objectives and processes, reasons and motives. From the point of view of death, in a secular view of the world everything relativizes itself in an absolute sense. In the religious understanding of life and context, the real motivation and necessities of all personal activity first manifest themselves in death. But it is not only the hammer blow of death that threatens the life and personal destiny of each one of us. Life itself is synonymous with death, as only in the inextricable dialectic of becoming and passing is there origin and end. Both levels continuously blend in the sense of the permanent attraction and tension that prevails between Thanatos and Eros.

The dominance, penetration, control, or possession of so-called outer reality is likewise a projection of the inner world. It is occasionally no longer possible to distinguish between inside and outside; beginning and end also blend, and sometimes, the ostensible laws of nature and history begin to falter, repeat themselves, or volatilize and distort a comprehensible connection between function and use, intent and effect, process and explanation. Certainty of or even a guarantee for a secure and predictable course of processes is given only to a limited extent. Secure facts, probabilities, and the unpredictable continuously determine the course of an occurrence and thwart our imagination and our actions to different degrees. Each assumption can become a presumption, as each insight can be relativized or refuted. Certainties and manifestations permanently dissipate, destroy themselves, or are destroyed.

A shot to the head is a very real thing. The consequences are anything but relative. Just like the reality of a torture chamber in a Chilean prison, cancer, an accident, a suicide, a war, sexual oppression, social destruction, or the effects of racism, discrimination, or emotional cruelty. There is a constitutive need to effect change in both a fundamental and an existential sense. The adjectives *active* and *passive*, however, play a subordinate role. Conscious and unconscious are less sharply separated than the philosophical distinction between *being* and *consciousness*. One can even control and influence reality in dreams or in the realm of fantasy. In Luis Buñuel's film *The Milky Way* from 1969, the protagonists fantasize the revolution and the resulting execution of the Pope so intensely that the rifle shots can also be heard in *real reality*. Even if the revolution and shooting never occurred, in this sequence, the imagination prevails over the manifestation of the real. This is the simple and clearly political intention of Surrealism. At the other end of the reality scale, a revolutionary who has been shot down takes off his shoes, removes his watch, and wants to get his hair cut. However, no doubt is cast on the relevance of his utterances and the justification for his rebellion *against reality*. On the contrary.