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The Legendary Journalist Günter Wallraff

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Insider in Mainstream German Media**

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Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Günter Wallraff's career	4
3. Notes on theory	6
4. Wallraff's disguises and methods	7
5. Reasons for Wallraff's Media Success Today	9
References	11

1. Introduction

The title of German author Günter Wallraff's most famous book is *Ganz unten* (1985). It has been translated into at least 35 languages and has sold over 10 million copies worldwide. **This paper will, first, give a brief overview of Wallraff's career and then turn to his – very important - recent achievements.**

As early as in the 1960s, Günter Wallraff's type of reporting was branded with a name; in Swedish we say *att wallraffa*, "to wallraff". After a long period of silence, he has made a remarkable comeback and published his most recent book on October 13, 2009. In many ways, he unmasks old phenomena that are (sadly enough) recurring today: bad working environments, inhumane conditions of homeless people and racism among Germans. At almost the same time as the book, a film about the latter topic was released. This film, *Black on White*, received a prestigious award as the best documentary film in the New York Film Festival (2011).

Wallraff's goal has always been: to *make* foul circumstances in society *public* (to create *Öffentlichkeit*)! This is one of my topics. The main topic, however, is his media success today, coupled with the questions: What does his success stem from? What is the theoretical background? And, does his media success today mean that he has completed his mission?

2. Günter Wallraff's career

Günter Wallraff's first book was called *Industriereportagen*, "Reports from the Factory", the contents of which were first published as articles in union newspapers in the mid-60s. According to his own account, he took these manual jobs partly in order to support his aging parents (his father had become severely ill from working similar jobs), and partly because he wanted to see if German society was as sick and Nazi-stricken as it had appeared to him while in military service. Soon, he was fascinated by the remnants of fascism in German society that he discovered. Recent work by historians has confirmed this. (*Der Spiegel*, 1/2012)

During his stints in industry, he absorbed every impression like a sponge, and then described them in his reports. This was Wallraff's main period of passive participation and observation. (Wallraff, G. *Wir brauchen dich/Industriereportagen*, 1966)

However, as early as the late 60s and early 70s, Wallraff turned to more advanced methods. Examples: he provoked the secret police in regard to neo-Nazis, and unmasked secret government business, posing as a weapons dealer. These were published as chapters in his second book, "The 13 Unwanted Reports". (Wallraff, G. *13 unerwünschte Reportagen*, Cologne, 1969)

Greece was in the media, also back then. Wallraff undertook a very dangerous action in 1974, chaining himself to a lamp-post in Athens, demonstrating against the military dictatorship in Greece. He was severely beaten and put in jail, but these actions by the police triggered public outrage. In a way, it foreshadowed the downfall of that regime just a few weeks later.

This went further than passive participation and observation, and more was to come in the book Wallraff edited with Berndt Engelmann, *Ihr da oben, wir da unten* ("You up there, we down here"): the "happening without invitation" is connected to the author's stint as a porter and messenger at Gerling, an important German insurance company in the early 70s. He reacted against what he saw as the CEO's system of injustice towards people further down in the hierarchy. One day he entered the directors' restaurant for lunch, whereby a major quarrel ensued when the company's own staff had to justify why a simple *Bote* (messenger) could not have his lunch there. Another *happening* involved a Swedish TV team filming in CEO Gerling's extravagant office, which heavily scandalized Mr. Gerling as he was the Swedish consul in Cologne at the time. (Engelmann, B. and Wallraff, G. *Ihr da oben – wir da unten*, 1975)

Active participation and observation started on a larger scale when Günter Wallraff, surprisingly, was hired by his deadly foe, the tabloid *BILD-ZEITUNG*, without them knowing his real identity. While working as one of their reporters in Hanover, he learned about – and later unmasked in his subsequent book – the techniques that are utilized to make the public read this paper. On the one hand, the author felt immensely disturbed by playing this double game and hiding his identity – on the other hand, it is also the first time when Wallraff (as he later confirms) actually felt tempted to stay and ascend through the ranks of the company, when offered a promotion.

However, he left hastily when - after four months - he was warned that his real identity would soon be revealed. (Wallraff, G. *Der Aufmacher. Der Mann, der bei Bild Hans Esser war*, 1978)

This trait – near total identification with his role – grew immensely strong during Wallraff's work on *Ganz unten*, which focuses heavily on the conditions of (mostly foreign and often illegal) subcontracted workers. Part of his Catholic upbringing still lingers in his ideal of the suffering Christ, which resonates better with a Turkish worker at the bottom of society (and in solidarity with others) than with a *BILD*-reporter whose main mission, according to Wallraff, is to keep people at the (miserable) place where they started. - Still, Wallraff's stint at *BILD-ZEITUNG* shows how invading an arch enemy's territory in such a way is one of the writer's favorite methods.

3. Notes on theory

Some have compared Wallraff with Erving Goffman and the Chicago School of Sociology. As we will see, Wallraff seems to go much further in the way he uses various methods and ways of expressing and distributing his work.

On the one hand, some have detected traces of Marxism and sociology in Wallraff's comments on factory working conditions – although Wallraff vehemently denies having seriously studied such theories.

On the other hand, he appears quite Marxist in my interview (in 2005), stating that he had always believed in a society steadily moving towards further improvement. Now, Wallraff says, everything previously gained by workers is being rolled back, it is “like a flood, where you try to stop it by sandbagging, but it's just getting worse day by day”.

Again, this portrays a conflict (in theory and practice) with a post-modern world, where short-term decisions and actions are on the agenda. Wallraff says (according to Gottschlich, p.258): “You cannot compare my work with literature which is developed exclusively at the desk. The main imaginary is always developed at the scene, where I am, sometimes, simultaneously director and actor. Things I have not experienced myself would be impossible to write down in a suitable form. My own experience always defines my work.” (Gottschlich, Jürgen, p. 258)

4. Wallraff's disguises and methods

Of course, the author has to use disguises when performing his roles. His open work, using his own identity, was ended back in the 1960s by letters sent out by the German Employers' Association, warning its members against hiring any person who looked like Wallraff. This, in effect, forced him to enter new stages of developing increasingly imaginative disguises.

These have included black wigs and dark contact lenses when performing as *Ali* in *Ganz unten*, as well as when making a film about Iranian guest workers in Japan. In his more recent stints, the author has found ways to play the role of a black person, as well as succeeding in looking 15-20 years younger when working in call centers (Günter Wallraff, born in 1942, is still extremely fit at the age of 69.)

Günter Wallraff is very “**modern**” when it comes to his means of production. **Film, TV, his own website – all communication tools are present**, and he is painstakingly accurate when securing his work from legal consequences. In addition, Wallraff uses miniscule film cameras and other modern techniques of documentation to, once again, allow the reader/viewer to see hidden realities. This is done not least in order to ensure that his work can be proven to stay **within the limits of the law**. Many of his books have repeatedly been challenged in court, but so far, Wallraff has won virtually every time.

The most important stages in Wallraff's developments when it comes to performing a role, are:

- **Passive participation and observation** **1963-69**
- **Happening „without invitation”** **1974-75**
- **Active participation and observation** **occasionally from 1968, more frequently in 1977 and 1983-1985)**
- **Staging a certain reality** **1983-85, 2008-2009**
- **Return to roles played earlier in his career.** **2007-**
- New angle: role as a black immigrant** **2008-2009**

In addition to the above, Wallraff has been a **strong investigative journalist** all along, and since 2007, he has published his articles in the highly reputed magazine *Die Zeit*. In April 2009, he again proved his ability in this field, revealing (possibly illegal) practices of online surveillance, conducted by the top leadership of *Deutsche Bahn* (the government-owned German Railway company) against its staff. The CEO of *Deutsche Bahn* had to step down (2009). (*Die Zeit*, ZEIT MAGAZIN, Hamburg, April 23, 2009)

Since 2007, Mr. Wallraff has also taken on a role similar to the one of a **lobbyist for strengthening consumer power**, for example, regarding customers' rights versus solicitors making calls from call centers. He has, in addition, **propagated** the issuing of a **minimum wage** law, and frequently **helps** people who are **unjustly treated at their workplace**. (Wallraff: "Instead of publicity, a phone call or a meeting is often enough.") He may even, occasionally, help a lawyer who needs a poignant text pertaining to such a case.

This shows Wallraff's increasing importance as **a voice for justice and change in German society**. Starting in 1985 (and especially since 2007), he has acquired **a national stage where he has access to TV and other German national mass media** in a wide variety of ways. Thus, his career has become a unique method of oscillating between the "lowest of the low" and the "VIP". Consequently, the need for masks and disguises when performing the former is obvious.

5. Reasons for Wallraff's Media Success Today

What are, then, the **reasons for Günter Wallraff's career change** from being called a "Communist in disguise" to a well-known TV personality? One **narrative technique** - which Wallraff shares with Swedish colleague Kerstin Fredholm and American Barbara Ehrenreich in *Nickel and Dimed* – has to do with the means of production.

First, the intensity of the experience turns the author into a first-person "*narrator I*", where she – or in Wallraff's case - he "feels deeply hurt, and rightly so – at times as a victim, at times as a culprit". "That lends him an authenticity which he still lives off today and which explains the response to his comeback." (*Der Spiegel*, Hamburg, 50/2007)

Second, already at the time of Wallraff's stint at BILD-Zeitung, and much more so after "Lowest of the Low" was published, people of all walks of life found **what and how Wallraff can do** absolutely fascinating.

The fact that Wallraff "disappeared" for about twenty years also contributes to this effect. At 45, he was a legend and a phantom that many referred to whenever some kind of undercover story or documentary stirred public interest. Then, when he resurfaced in 2007, his image almost automatically rose with a double effect. **Wallraff became a living legend, even more active than before!**

Third, **German society has also changed** during the last 20 years. Gone is the euphoria of reunification (in many camps), what remains is a kind of "turbo capitalism" with an ugly face of leaving the not so adaptable behind. After a prolonged debate, many have realized that Wallraff has affected reality and society more than all his intellectual colleagues together. This created a wish for someone who can inspire change. According to Wallraff's latest biographer Jürgen Gottschlich, even conservative Germans agree that "**his books have changed our world. Who can claim to have fulfilled such a mission?**" (Gottschlich, J. *Der Mann, der Günter Wallraff ist* ["The real Günter Wallraff"], p. 275)

Fourth, **on the one hand:** even if Wallraff himself complains about racism in Germany, polls **show that biases against minorities overall are less** prevalent than before. Also, a large segment of German society is "center-to-left leaning", thus sharing Wallraff's class perspective. Since 2011, the south-western *Bundesland* Baden-Wuerttemberg, for example, has a Green Prime minister - leading a coalition where the Social Democrats are the minor partner. In some other parts of Germany, "Die Linke" (the Left), Social Democrats, and Greens are also strong. (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Stuttgart, ed. 287, December 13, 2011, "Politik" p. 5)

Fifth, **on the other hand:** the aforementioned revelations in *Der Spiegel* about prominent politicians in the 1950s through the 80s are not enough when it comes to old and more recent Fascism. Also in 2011, a **Neo-Nazi terror cell** was exposed in Eastern Germany. Police **records show** that the **handling** of this case was **appallingly lax**. In the meantime, the terror cell

murdered ten people (nine immigrants and one police woman, (2000-2007). (*Der Spiegel*, Hamburg, (NOV. 2011, 1/2012)

I would claim that the **interest in Wallraff's work** is bound to **grow when there is this kind of social tension**. It will grow when there is tension between a large "liberal" segment of society on the one hand - and Fascist groups and the very real fear of rising Fascism on the other. Then, Wallraff - especially in the role of a black man who challenges skinheads - is the one who dares! And - who attracts attention.

Still, a large portion of Wallraff 's vision of a steadily improving society remains to be achieved. Therefore, Günter Wallraff has started a new foundation, giving out grants to journalists who want to follow in his footsteps. There is still a need for *making* foul circumstances in society *public* (**create *Öffentlichkeit!***)

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