

MICHAEL WILKINSON AUTONOMIC MOMENTS

It would be a great mistake to think that youth movements are always progressive - that indeed they always encode ideas of fun and freedom. In contrast, they can be nationalistic and totalitarian: the young moulded into ideological stormtroopers or militaristic robots - ready to do the regime's bidding at whatever cost, without the checks and balances that adulthood often brings. You only need to think of the Hitler Youth, the Komsomol or today's Nashi movement in Russia.

In the West we are used to a consumerist, hedonistic model of youth that is also closely tied to the dominant ideology. Originating in America near the end of the Second World War, the concept of the Teenager was born out of the stresses and strife of social unrest and a global conflict. It is now at the heart of Western values: it is, if you like, a smiling, attractive, perennially youthful face that masks a sixty year old New World Order.

During the winter of 1944, two years after the term 'youth culture' was coined by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons, the word Teenager passed into general currency. It represented a novel solution to a problem that had vexed governments in Europe and America ever since the concept of Adolescence had been defined by the American psychologist Stanley Hall - whose monumental book on the subject ("Adolescence", 1904) first collated pubertal phenomena.

Around the turn of the century, it became obvious that there was a new class, one that could be either a massive social problem or an inspirational source of hope for the future. The Adolescent marked an intermediary stage between childhood and adulthood, defined by Hall as being between 13 and 24, that had arisen because of industrialisation, urbanisation and the increasing drive towards a mass society as opposed to the previous monarchical or feudal models.

In many ways the Adolescent was the product of the late 18th century: the Industrial Revolution, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution. The first concentrated the population in the new, rapidly expanding cities; the second enshrined the phrase 'all men are created equal' in the 1776 Declaration of Independence; the third introduced the idea of the generation gap in Article 28 of its 'Declaration of the Rights of Man' - 'one generation cannot subject to its law the future generations'.

The very first definitions of youth as a separate class in the West occurred because of urban street gangs: by the middle of the 19th century, 'Juvenile Delinquency' was already a buzzword in Europe and America and the idea that youth was a social menace became established: this thinking dominated the first reactions towards this new class. Adult fears about the future were projected onto the adolescents who were beginning to behave in unexpected and inexplicable ways.

From the beginning of the 20th century, the struggle was on: between adults who wanted to regiment and militarise youth, and between the real-time young who were beginning to wonder what a true youth culture could be. One of the earliest examples of the latter were the *Wandervogel*, young German students and school children who reacted against their country's regimentation by forming their own groups and travelling around the countryside, singing songs and enjoying nature.

They were dwarfed, however, by the *Jungdeutschlandbund*: a nationalistic organisation that - even more than the British Boy Scouts - aimed to give the young experience of the

open air and militaristic training. By 1914, they were the biggest youth group in the world, at 750,000 members, with an ideology of 'war is beautiful. Its greatness lifts man's heart above earthly things, above the daily round. Such an hour awaits us.. let that be heaven for young Germany'.

The triumph of militarism can be seen in the unanimous enthusiasm showed by Europe's young at the outbreak of the First World War. Four years of mass slaughter - with up to three million adolescents killed - resulted in the hostility to adults expressed by poems like Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth". The big ideas about honour and sacrifice - '*dulce est mori pro patria*' - were over . The adolescents of the 1920's were going to do things their own way.

During the 1920's, a new idea of youth as a hedonist consumer began to take hold in both Europe and America. It was symbolised by the Flapper - the young, carefree girl with bobbed hair, heavy make up and the ever present cigarette - who came into her own at a time when there were many more young women than men (thanks to the slaughter of the First World War) and when female emancipation was becoming institutionalised.

In America the idea of a nationwide, discrete class of youth was fostered by the increasing numbers of adolescents in higher education. They peopled the first youth market, which quickly attracted a range of products - movies, perfumes, cosmetics, jazz records, radios - and attitudes, most loosely a wish to have fun and to live in the present. The big ideas had led to mass destruction. Much better to party: and so, hedonism became an ideology - shared by the young in Paris, Berlin, London.

The Crash of 1929 - a global economic meltdown - swung the pendulum the other way. Capitalism had failed, and it was time for a new solution: the youth of Europe began to polarise between the extremes of Fascism and Communism. In Italy, Germany and Russia, there arose compulsory state youth groups that trained adolescents in totalitarian ideologies. The Hitler Youth, in particular, was cunningly aimed at the young: with an anti-parent flavour and young leaders. Youth was led by youth.

This polarisation flavoured the 1930's: it spread to Britain and America and threatened to destabilise each country. Both sponsored state youth work schemes, but the real change came from the young themselves: beginning in 1937, the onset of Swing Music created a whole new youth subculture, consisting of clothes, music, dances, and slang. Originating in hot Negro jazz and Negro styles, Swing took the media and music industry by surprise: it was a real movement from below.

Swing was the youth-culture backdrop to the Second World War - which began in 1939. In Germany and Occupied France, young Swing fans like the Hamburg Swings and the Zazous defied the Nazis by refusing to dress in uniform and by listening and dancing to banned jazz music. If they were caught, they were sent to Forced Labour camps or Youth Concentration Camps. When the American GIs arrived in Britain en masse, they brought with them their music, Swing.

America entered the war in 1941. Two years later there was a national scandal about juvenile delinquency, as the lack of parental controls and disturbance of wartime unsettled some of the young. The American solution was a mixture of idealism and pragmatism: on noticing the size of the potential youth market - an estimated \$750 million in late 1944 - the authorities, together with big business, decided to promote the idea of the Teenager as a democratic, socially responsible consumer.

It worked. The young enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy within the confines of consumerism: they were consulted on youth styles, and catered to by an ever-growing array of retail outlets and magazines like the extremely successful "Seventeen" (launched September 1944). Adults were still in control of the purse strings, and the means of production, but could see that allowing a certain amount of freedom headed off the worst impulses of potential delinquents.

The origin of the Teenager coincided with the end of the Second World War and the Atom Bomb explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Americans were the true victors, and the Teenager was their ultimate product. A pleasure seeking individual who lived in the moment, the Teenager was the perfect symbol for a world in which all the old certainties had been atomised, in which a kind of mass existentialism was the only solution to the distinct possibility of nuclear holocaust.

This is the new world order under which the West has lived for the last six decades. The Teenager has become an important part of Western life and business, passing through many different manifestations in the UK: the Edwardian or Teddy Boy (1952-9); the Modernist or Mod (1958-1967); the Hippie (1966-1977); the Glam Rocker or Glitter Kid (1972-1975); the Punk (1976-79) and so on. By the early eighties, all these cults - or their revivals - coexisted in a climate of barely suppressed hostility.

Since the 1980's, the Teenage model of consumption has spread throughout all age groups, from the pre-teens to fifty- and sixty-somethings. It no longer has any specific reference to the 13-24 age group, who indeed are often excluded by government policy. In the intervening thirty or so years the Teenage has, by degrees, become an industrial model and a fairly genial method of social control rather than a living, dynamic culture. It is a victim of its own success.

Yet there is something that sticks in the brain. The Teddy Boy and the Punk, The Mod and the Glitter Kid, the Hippie and the late 1980's Raver: they all represent a moment of youth break-out. All of these movements were generated from below: not by the culture industries but by young people themselves. They variously represent an attempt by the young to come to terms with the world that they find themselves in, a world made not by them but by adults. So they want change.

It is that element of surprise, of something that is not controlled by marketing or media, that made - and can still make - youth culture so exciting. In the rare moments when it occurs, it creates a sense of freedom and a burst of energy that generates a furious forward momentum: for an instant, anything seems possible and the world can be remade anew. It happens in many times and places - in the West, most recently in the anti-capitalist Occupy movements - and will happen again.

Michael Wilkinson's beautifully coloured and painterly assemblages freeze moments of autonomy in a form that is deceptively classical. On first appearance, the paintings are very formal, almost static, but then you look at the detail: small pictures and photographs that open the door into another world. The made up shirts and the items of sculpture placed around the gallery provide an extra dimension: this is an environment, a work in progress that crosses forms to transform.

Wilkinson sources images from those rare moments when freedom is enacted: the Paris Commune (1871); the *evenements* of Paris in May 1968; the photos of Dresden that formed the decor of Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's high Punk high concept shop at

430 Kings Road, Seditonaries (late 1976-79). To varying degrees, all are now part of a familiar historical past, but, in his obsessive revisiting of the theme, Wilkinson rewrites the story and returns to it some of the original dynamism.

The Paris Commune is perhaps the least familiar: a two month Worker's Revolt that overthrew the existing regime (the Second Empire) and instituted a new Government in Paris. For a few weeks, the people were the masters of their own destiny: it was a moment of freedom at once inspiring and terrible - even more so when the regular Army retook Paris after a bloody battle and killed thousands and thousands of Communards.

The Commune was, as Kristin Ross writes, a 'a revolt against deep forms of social regimentation'. Every kind of boundary was broken - 'between genres, between aesthetic and political discourses, between high art and reportage' - in an intoxicating burst of energy. The sixteen year old poet Arthur Rimbaud ran away from home to join the Commune and found a ferment that, while inspiring poems like "*L'Orgie Parisienne ou Paris se repeuple*", completely matched his desire to remake the world.

Rimbaud himself can now be seen as a harbinger of the youthful revolutionaries of the 20th century: resolute in his hatred of existing social convention, traditional forms of expression, and indeed the existing power structure. Just over a century later, these ideas would be replayed in the riots that galvanised Paris for a month during May 1968. Spreading from students into a general strike that paralysed France, these events initiated another autonomic burst that inspired a generation.

Eight years later, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood were attempting to introduce Paris 1968 into British Pop culture. For their shop, "Sex", they designed sexually provocative T shirts - some featuring extreme gay, sadomasochistic and even pedophilic imagery - as well as beautifully detailed collaged shirts with a extremist slogans from left and right (appliques of Karl Marx and Hitler Youth patches), better known as the Anarchy Shirt.

At their centre were actual slogans from Paris 1968 - "A Bas Le Coca Cola", "Never Work" - that were inspired by the Situationists, the very loose group of alternative playful and strident ideologues whose prime aim was to attack The Spectacle - the unholy marriage between state, media and industry through which social control is maintained by the invasion of the individual's subconscious. The success of May 1968 saw their critique turned into action, with profound and lasting consequences.

Through the shop-affiliated group, the Sex Pistols, McLaren and Westwood aimed to take their provocations into the heart of British culture. By the late autumn, the Sex Pistols were ubiquitous in the youth media as the leaders of a new movement: Punk. When they were provoked by a drunken presenter and swore on tea time television, the Sex Pistols became a front page news story, a scandalous sensation, a national issue. It was another break in history.

At the same time, McLaren and Westwood were designing their new shop at number 430 Kings Road, "Seditonaries", to showcase their latest range of designs, including the bondage suit. For the interior of the shop, they took blow-up photos of Dresden, the city that in February 1945 was obliterated by the British and the Americans in a fire-storm that killed over 20,000 people. To McLaren and Westwood, this was a shameful episode in British history that needed exposing.

A few weeks after the opening of Seditonaries, the Sex Pistols were sacked by not one two record labels - EMI and A&M. They were music industry pariahs and public enemies.

Eventually they were signed by Richard Branson's Virgin Records, and released their response to Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee (25 years on the throne) just in time for the celebrations in late May 1977. This was a national and international event, and "God Save The Queen" was the only visible protest.

Despite being banned right across the media, the record went to the top of the charts: this was what the youth of Britain thought about the whole rotten sham. For England was not a great country in 1977, and the Jubilee was an attempt to paper over the cracks. The Sex Pistols themselves were vilified in the press and physically attacked but they had given voice to a generation. Thirty six years later, they remain national figures, while Punk is regarded as the last autonomous and antinomian youth culture.

In referring back to these ruptures in the everyday, these instants when the door opens to reveal the portal to an alternative world, Michael Wilkinson walks a delicate line between several emotions: obsessiveness - a fan's eye view that records revolutionary activity; wonder - that these moments ever happened; and a sense of sadness, now that so much of youth culture is merely materialistic and hollow, that is nevertheless mixed with a tinge of hope.

Change is necessary. Hope for the future is a vital human characteristic. The young are always at the forefront of the future. Might these transformational moments happen again, and if so where and when?

- Jon Savage, author of *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (1991) and *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (2007)