Conventionality and Innovation: Détournement in 2011-2012 Protest Art

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Abstract
In this paper I look into the conventional side of protest street art in 2011–2012. I am particularly interested in the rules of formation of revolutionary and protest images, in large part consisting of the reproduction of existing images.

Using the iconographical and comparative method of image analysis, I present three case studies of reusing and recycling certain symbols and artifacts during protests of the Indignados movement in Spain, the Occupy movement in the United States, and the Egyptian revolution during the Arab Spring..

Thanks to supplementing my research with the situationist theory of détournement strategy, I was able to distinguish three modes of image and symbol reproduction: the historical, the external, and the internal. Reproducing in the historical mode consists of referring to certain symbols or images from the past—in the external mode—to symbols or images that are inherently neutral to the protest. The internal mode of reproduction works within the protest, producing its original symbols, images and mythology, specific to each social movement.

In conclusion, the historical and the external modes of reproduction are generally responsible for the conventional visual components of protest; the internal mode on the other hand, is generally responsible for more distinctive, innovative ones.

Keywords
Protest art; street art; détournement; Indignados; Arab Spring; Occupy

1. Introduction

Although revolts and protests supposedly aim towards a new order, their visual sphere seems to be mostly conventional, even repetitive. This paradox has its roots in propaganda purposes—images and symbols on protest posters, banners, flags, leaflets, pins, etc. have to be comprehensible, easy to identify, and quick to reproduce further. For this reason, the visual sphere of protest is founded on reproduction mechanisms.

The topic of both image reproduction and protest art were of particular interest to members of the Situationist International artistic revolutionary avant-garde group that was prominent in 1957–1972 and was an active party during the events of May 1968 (see Viénet, 1992). One of the practices that the group adopted as a method of artistic creation was détournement. This French word can mean diversion, misappropriation, as well as hijacking (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.) —and so it reflects quite well the sense of situationist practice, consisting of reusing and recontextualizing any visual, artistic, linguistic, or 'everyday-life' elements to create new artwork. A full description of its meaning, ways of functioning, and types are given by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman in a text called *A User's Guide to Détournement*. In its crucial part the authors claim that even if the Situationist International was the first to conceptu-

alize and intentionally apply this method, the group didn't invent it, because détournement was commonly used long before the avant-garde was even born. The authors differentiate minor and deceptive détournements. The first are based on appropriation of an element that is of little or no importance to its source; the second—in contrast, consists of reusing the most important fragment of its previous setting. Apart from this, Debord and Wolman distinguished the so-called ultra-détournement, which operates in the social dimension— for example appropriation of gestures, customs, or the meanings of words (Debord and Wolman, 2006, p. 20–21).

It is important to stress that Debord and Wolman saw this practice as a means to achieve the cultural hegemony of the proletariat:

> "Détournement not only leads to the discovery of new aspects of talent; in addition, clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of a real class struggle. The cheapness of its products is the heavy artillery that breaks through all the Chinese walls of understanding. It is a real means of proletarian artistic education, the first step toward a literary communism." (Debord and Wolman, 2006, p. 18)

Détournement was therefore not only an artistic, but also a revolutionary practice. By "détourning" images or symbols, it is possible to quickly produce lots of images that are new, powerful, and subversive. Because the main rule of détournement is appropriating and recycling any given, but most often symbolically saturated or "influential" material, it can also incorporate such practices as collage, assemblage, ready-made, subvertising, and culture jamming, as well as acts of iconoclasm, caricature, deforming, and paraphrasing. Almost all of the aforementioned forms occur in protest art. Thus, applying the theory of détournement to researching current protest art should make it possible to understand its discursive dynamics, as well as its formal diversity. This paper aims to answer the question of whether the mechanism of image reproduction during protest follows any rules, and if so, what are its most common strategies. Using the iconographical method I would like to analyze and compare three case studies of détournements in the visual sphere of interconnected protests of the Arab Spring, the Indignados, and the Occupy movements, which took place in 2011—2012. I intend to take into account their formal and symbolical interconnections, as well as socio-geopolitical context. Although the course and character of each movement were very different—during the Arab Spring, the revolts were far more violent as the military was used in the fight against the protesters—its participants spoke of mutual inspirations and a kind of a kindred spirit between these protests (Ancelovici Dufour and Nez, 2016, pp. 30–31; Sitrin, 2012, p. 14). When writing about the protests of the Indignados and of Occupy Ancelocivi, Dufour and Nez pointed out: "Their singularity (demonstrated by testimonies and published studies) should not prevent us from considering them together analytically" (Ancelovici, Dufour and Nez, 2016, p. 23). Even though they are generally interpreted as having failed to bring about the political change and social justice for which they fought (more literature on the subject is mentioned in Ancelovici, Dufour and Nez, 2016, p. 19), they transformed the discourse concerning the manner of protesting and pursuing modern democracy. They all have risen on a mass scale thanks to the usage of online channels of communication (Castells, 2012, pp. 57—62; 119; 174—181), which included innovative methods of organization, documentation, and promotion of protest ideas and events. Moreover, during the Indignados and the Occupy protests, sit-in strikes grew into full-time camps, supporting both the basic needs and activist initiatives of the community. In addition, the protests also had adventitious "side effects" in the arts —particularly Egyptian street art had its moment both on Cairo's streets and in the global media (Awad and Wagoner, 2018, p. 2).

All of the seven artworks I will be referring to are posters and stencils. It is likely that most of them don't survive in their material form—they are accessible online in photos or in graphic format in case of posters. The chosen examples are, of course, just a small segment of protest art of 2011—2012, yet in each case study, the détourned image is used differently. Among these various methods of image reproduction during protests, I distinguished three crucial modes: historical, external, and internal. This typology is meant to expose the strategies of image formation and vi-

sual communication, that are most commonly used during protests.

2. Is Sol the new Bastille?

Historicization of the Indignados protest

Between May 15 and June 6, 2011, during the beginnings of the Indignados protests, various banners, leaflets, and stickers started to appear on Madrid walls. One of the posters depicts Marianne from *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugene Delacroix (see at Hadzelek, June 6, 2011). Her figure was extracted from the rest of the painting and put on a white background with altered attributes—in one hand she is holding a peach-colored rose, replacing the bayonet with the sign of peaceful protest, in the other the Spanish instead of the French flag. On the left side of the image, text with large black capital letters is written. It says "Sol es la Nueva Bastilla," which means "Sol is the new Bastille." "Sol" refers to the short name for Puerta del Sol, a public square in Madrid, which was occupied by the protesters, who camped there for several weeks, from June 12 to August 2, 2011.

Perhaps the usage of the figure of Marianne on the poster may seem an obvious choice. *Liberty Leading the People* is Delacroix's most famous painting, exhibited at the Louvre, reproduced in history textbooks, and often appearing in the popular culture sphere. Yet the juxtaposition of the protest slogan, paralleling Puerta del Sol and the Bastille, and the illustrious, yet recontextualized, "updated" personification of liberty, is incoherent. Delacroix's painting was referring to the revolution of 1830—and not 1789, when the Bastille was stormed. It seems that in this case, the historical truth and accuracy of the visual and rhetorical components turned out to be less important than revolutionary symbolic. Delacroix's Liberty, associated with the symbol of revolution in general, was détourned and used to legitimate the protest of the Indignados by comparing them with the sans-culottes.

Of course, it is important to ask why the author of the poster did not choose to evoke the very rich Spanish revolutionary tradition. It seems that there were three reasons for this: firstly, the importance of the spatial connotations of both events. The storming of the Bastille was an event of making the city space communal, egalitarian, and subordinate to the will of a new sovereign—the people. The rebellious gesture of appropriating this space by the citizens was later repeated in all mass revolts, but was especially important during the Indignados protests when the sit-in model was establishe that then spread to the Occupy revolts (Rovisco, 2017, p. 340). Perpetual camping and occupying one of the main squares of the city was not only a strategy of making the protest visible to both Madrid's inhabitants and tourists, but also an attempt to build a new community, whose rules were inspired mainly by anarchism and direct democracy. The parallel from the poster emphasizes that Puerta del Sol, like the Bastille during French Revolution, is a place of both political struggle and play, a symbol of the escalation of violence, as well as of the formulation of a new collectivity (Lüsebrink and Reichardt, 1997, p. 4).

Secondly, the historical references to revolutions of 1789 and 1830 were perhaps more fitting because of their historical distance and, in consequence, political vagueness—as nowadays, the French revolution is generally perceived as a positive breakthrough and a milestone in pursuing social equality and modern European democracy, while a reference to, for example, the Spanish Civil War could be more polarizing. In this way, the propaganda purpose of the poster was achieved—it endorsed revolution, and yet—as with the Indignados movement itself—stayed clear of any definite political statements or affiliations (Castells, 2012, p. 125) in order to mobilize as many participants as possible. Lastly, evoking not only the rich symbolism of the Bastille and the French Revolution, but also the figure of Delacroix's Marianne and therefore the victory of the third estate during the Three Glorious Days, the author of the poster strengthened its persuasion, by giving it a hopeful, triumphant tone—this time the People led by Liberty were the protesters of the Indignados movement.

The analyzed poster is in my opinion an example of the historical mode of reproduction of images and symbols, so acutely described by Karl Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:*

> "Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they appear to be revolutionizing themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented, in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, that is when they nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honoured guise and with this borrowed language." (Marx, 2002, pp. 19–20).

Historicizing a social movement aims to situate it in relation to current political conditions, but also to build its identity. This strategy is most commonly used to legitimize—or discredit—a certain person, situation, tendency, or movement by collating it with its historical "analogy", whether positive or negative. It serves as an interpretive tool, a cognitive shortcut, but also a way of assigning purpose and meaning to the enterprise. Most probably that was the case here, considering that the poster appeared on the streets in the first week of demonstrations, at the very early stage of the Indignados protest.

3. The Charging Bull of Wall Street versus the Occupy movement—the case of an external mode of image reproduction

Even before the actual beginning of the protests of Occupy Wall Street on September 17, 2011, the *Charging Bull*, a bronze sculpture by Arturo di Modica, became one of the symbols, or rather anti-idols of the movement, when it *appeared in the Adbusters magazine in the September—October issue in 2011 (Adbusters America, 2011; Bierut, April 30, 2012). The poster is in black and white, the Charging Bull is depicted at its center. A ballerina, dressed in a black tricot, is standing on the bull's back in arabesque. The background is covered in fumes, from which protesters in gas masks emerge. At the bottom is written: "#Occupy Wall Street/ September 17th./ Bring tent./" in white capital letters, and at the top, in red capital letters: "What/ is our/ one/ demand?/".*

Apart from this example, the Charging Bull also appeared on many more protest prints and graphics, including the one by Alexandra Clotfelter, showing the Bull in chains with the caption "The beginning is near" (see Striking Posters of Occupy Wall Street, November 23, 2011), or accompanied by the proverb *"Take the bull by the horns," by Randy Gentile (see MacGuill A., Noor, O., February 2, 2012).* The statue itself was also an object of various modifications during the protests—such as parading with a handmade mini-version as a *"false idol" (see Scharper, Oktober 11, 2011).* Although it was never vandalized by the occupiers, for over a year from the beginning of protests it was guarded by the police and fenced with metal gates (Haberman, Semptember 17, 2012, para. 7). At any rate, in all Occupy détournements of the *Charging Bull, it* is depicted as an object of contempt and ridicule or an enemy to fight against. *Why was the Charging Bull—literally—chosen for an anti-idol of the Occupy movement?*

Here again arises the matter of interconnection of a détourned object and protest's physical location. Since 1989, the sculpture has been located on Bowling Green in the Financial District of Manhattan, one of the most prominent financial centers of the world. Through the years it has become a well-known tourist attraction and a lucky charm for Wall Street businessmen. On its own website the Bull is introduced *as "a symbol of courage and virility"*, and *"a way to celebrate the can-do spirit of America and especially New York, where* people from all other the world could come regardless of their origin or circumstances, and through determination and hard work overcome every obstacle to become successful." (History of the Charging Bull of Wall Street, n.d.). *The declared symbolism is in accordance with the general attributes assigned to the bull in Western cultures, such as strength, hard work and endurance.*

It is worth noting how during the Occupy protests interpretation of the meaning of the *Charging Bull* has not changed. The Bull was originally intended to symbolize the American dream and the success-driven capitalist economy. The Occupy movement, which questioned these ideals, started to use the statue as the visual representation of a broken system—what altered was a radicalization of the protesters' perception towards the statue's meaning. Perhaps the reason for this, apart from site-specific context of the Charging Bull, was the fact that in August 2011, just a month before the protests started, the first edition of the book "The Global Minotaur" by Yannis Varoufakis was published. It was an

analysis of the causes of the financial crash of 2008. The figure of a Minotaur, the bull-like monster from Greek mythology, was an analogy for the United States' financial system and its relation to the global economy. It is needless to add that the formation of Occupy movement was directly related to the economic crisis after 2008.

The statue had its fixed meaning, independent from the course of the revolt. As an object essentially unrelated to the protest, an artwork treated mainly as a city-beautifier, it was détourned, recontextualized and reproduced on banners, posters, pins, etc. as an anti-idol of the Occupy movement. In some examples – as on "The beginning is near" and "Take the bull by the horns" posters—the statue was put in a dynamic scene where it embodied the enemy that must be fought. In other cases, for example in the Adbusters poster, its exact appearance and spatial context was maintained in order to enhance the particularity of the area where it is found and to persuade protesters to physically occupy it. I call this specific strategy of détourning an object extraneous to the individual protest, and using it in a revolutionary context anyway, the external mode of reproduction of images.

While historicization mode of reproduction is used to legitimize or discredit its object through identification with any given historical event, the external mode consists of politicization. The strategy of collating the Indignados protest with French revolutionary tradition had a mitigating, consensus-building purpose, because the events of 1789 and 1830 are commonly considered a positive breakthrough, and the validity of the revolting Third Estate is not up for discussion. The antagonizing, subversive power of détournement has made the seemingly neutral statue of a bull a powerful, yet negatively associated symbol. Apart from this, the precedent of police guarding the Charging Bull, while repeatedly violently dispersing the protest camp in Zucotti Park is also worth consideration, for the reason that it exposed the priority of protecting the safety of a the statue rather than the citizens.

4. Justice, Superwoman, the hero, the martyr. "The Girl in the Blue Bra" as an emblem of the Egyptian revolution

After the protest in Tahrir Square in Cairo on December 17, 2011, almost all leading visual mass media, whether printed or online, Egyptian or foreign, published a film or a film still of the so-called Girl in the Blue Bra, depicting a young woman lying on the ground. It is impossible to see her face, because her abaya is lifted up, covering her head and showing an azure bra, as she is dragged, beaten, and kicked by three soldiers in full armor. The image quickly became a symbol of undeserved violation of the citizens, especially women, by the state and the military (Hafez, 2014, p. 20; Kirollos, 2016, pp.142-143).

This symbol was détourned and used on walls in Cairo by at least three street artists in their stencils—an anonymous artist who depicted The Blue Bra Girl as a personification of Justice (see Zakarevičiūtė, 2013, p. 61, no. 33); El Tennen, who portrayed the protester as Superwoman (see Zakarevičiūtė, 2013, p. 96, no. 55); and Bahia Shehab, who declined to represent the person and painted only the bra (see Shehab, Some People, n.d.).

Before analyzing these examples, it seems necessary to stress how extraordinary was the position of street art, especially graffiti, in Cairo at that time. New local artists emerged on the Cairo street art scene, and its rapid growth fueled international recognition (Awad and Wagoner, 2018, p. 2). As Rana Jarbou put it, "Graffiti and street artists' creation and circulation of new symbols and language were illustrative of the events, cathartic for their audiences, and educational for outsiders" (Jarbou, 2018, p. 139). While indispensably taking part in creating an alternative discourse, it also physically—and illegally—appropriated city space for persuasive purposes (Awad and Wagoner, 2018, p. 2). While it lasts, protest graffiti, despite its generally ephemeral character, serves as a substitution for actual, active protest, by making the antagonism constantly visible and present for every citizen. In other words, protest graffiti designates urban space as a constant battlefield.

This trait of fighting the hegemony of media and official culture is closely associated with the International Situationist practice of graffiti, which grew in importance during May 1968, although the situationist graffiti had a predominantly verbal character. The majority of examples of situationist graffiti from that time, collected in the Situationist International Anthology, were a call to action, understood as a transformation of everyday life: "Talk to your neighbours"; "Create"; "Write everywhere" (Knabb, 2006, pp. 445–457). Some of them were also détourned quotations of Friedrich Nietzsche, André Breton or Heraclitus, etc. Frances Stracey writes that graffiti "had been a formative practice within the pre-history of the Situationist International and continued to be deployed as a strategic weapon throughout the group's lifetime" (Stracey, 2014, p. 77). According to the author, graffiti was inscribed in a wider set of practices of the situationists, called constructed situations. Because of their ephemerality, subversiveness, and absurdity in terms of the constant imperative of profit and productivity, constructed situations exposed and denounced the omnipresent spectacle (Stracey, 2014, pp. 76–78). Graffiti, because of its common association with vandalism of private or municipal proprierty, was a perfect tool for that. Although unpopular back then, stencils would be perhaps even more in agreement with situationist practice, as while they carry the same ideological features as graffiti, they are faster and easier to reproduce on a mass scale.

While writing about Arabic graffiti during the Arab Uprisings, Rana Jarbou, already quoted before, gave a description of street art practice that is very similar to the definition of détournement strategy itself:

> "Street artists used this visual language of branding, playing with and on words, and mixing and matching images to create new meanings, and notably repeating them too, an effective tactic in advertising. The provocative disruption is the first step in delivering their message. The next step, making out its meaning, was dependent on effectiveness of the provocation" (Jarbou, 2018, p. 139).

The anonymous all-black stencil originally placed in Emir Kadar street, on which The Blue Bra Girl is depicted as a personification of Justice is a clear example of mixing and emulating two different, symbolically saturated images. She is standing in a graceful pose with two attributes: a machine gun in one hand and a balance scale in other, and her right leg sticks out. Her outfit, composed of a flowing skirt and bra recalls those of belly dancers, but she also seems to wear a helmet of some sort. Above her raised left arm with the scale the author placed a laconic inscription, or rather a title: "Aadla" which means "Justice" (Zakarevi□i□t□, 2013, p. 54). The Blue Bra Girl, embodying all protesting Egyptian women, becomes a modern Themis, goddess of not only justice, but also wisdom and good counsel. This seemingly plain image contrasts the feminine and the masculine, as well as the almost dancing pose of the women and unyielding stillness of the scale—the Blue Bra Girl here, even if exposed, is not a victim, but a figure of strength and righteousness.
In the same manner Egyptian street artist El Teneen depicted The Blue Bra Girl as a Superwoman in her stencil *Supergirl Blue Bra*. She is painted in a dynamic fighting pose with clenched fists, a flowing red cape, and a grimace on her face. Her costume recalls the uniform of Superman, except instead of the usual tight top she is wearing a blue bra, and has red Arabic letter "tha" on her chest. It is an abbreviation of "thawra", which means revolution. The text at the bottom in translation means: "It continues" (Linssen, 2018, p. 11). Again, the protester is portrayed as heroic and unconquerable. These two artworks have a strong feminist message, in accordance with heated discussions of that time, concerning women's rights and their security during protests, that were followed by the active involvement of thousands of Egyptian women in marches and rallies.

The last example of discussed détournements of the still of The Blue Bra Girl in street art, in many ways contrasting with the previous ones, is Bahia Shehab's stencil from the cycle called *Some People*. In this case, the only thing depicted is a blue bra. It seems that this object became so significant for two reasons: because of the lack of any other distinctive features of the protester, and because of the soldiers' breaking of taboo by violently stripping her. The inscription below the image says in Arabic: "There are people who have been stripped naked so you can live decently," and so it brings up both the heroism and martyrdom of women protesters. According to the author, the sacrifice made by

them during the uprising was emphasized because of the specific situation at the turn of May and June 2012, when the protests started to fade away (Shehab, Some People, n.d.). The artist also stated that putting the stencil on the streets of Cairo was a way to work through the collective sense of shame and humiliation after the incident, which sadly was not isolated (Jarbou, 2018, p. 144).

Two important procedures in building a narrative of protest are idealization and monumentalization. Because of them, the Girl in the Blue Bra, a victim of military and state violence, became a hero and a martyr at the same time. All of the examples analyzed in this section represent the internal mode of reproduction of images. The internal mode consists of reproducing images "inside" the protest—when the revolt is being documented and processed, and in consequence it produces its own mythology, symbols, images, and artworks. These "side effects" are separate and specific for each movement—and the scene of the beating of the Blue Bra Girl is the one that was most commonly associated with the Egyptian uprising in 2011—2012 and engraved in the collective memory for good.

6. Conclusion

While reflecting on the repetitiveness of protest art and its visual sphere, I distinguished three modes, or strategies, that are most commonly used within the image reproduction mechanism, and named them historical, external and internal. As I tried to demonstrate through examples, both the historical and external modes of reproduction are generally related to or "responsible" for the conventional visual components of protest—the internal mode, on the other hand—for more distinctive, innovative components. Moreover, the historical and external modes of reproduction are, metaphorically speaking, a battlefield of the meaning of images, whereas internal reproduction illustrates and processes current events and in this sense, is rather a foundry of new images. The historicization strategy is based on the legitimization or discrediting of the opponent, the movement itself or the individuals from either group, by assigning a historical analogy to the subject and identifying it through this association, either in a positive or an unfavorable way. The external mode of reproduction consists of politicizing an image that was previously extraneous and neutral towards the protest. The internal mode reproduces the images within itself in order to create an autonarration of the protest—this often happens through idealization and monumentalization of its ideals, events and participants.

The presented model of different image reproduction mechanisms, supplemented with the situationist theory of détournement strategy, of course has its limitations. It is strictly focused on those protest images, that are mainly conventional, reproduced, and recontextualized, perhaps slightly neglecting innovative, creative images that in my view, appear significantly less often. Still, I believe the model has scientific value because of its nuanced answer to a question about the conventionality and innovation of protest art, as well as its ability to organize the researched material and to make it possible to see the individual artworks in their broader context and interconnections.

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