



Alternative Media and Visual Counter-Narratives: Political Posters as visual symbols of protest

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Posters are the prime means of propaganda and publicity [...] we considered them particularly useful for the promotion of our political positions and to propagandize events and festivals. I do not know exactly what the law states and why it is considered illegal, but this conflicts with the democratic right of free expression of ideas which I think is much more important and we have to defend it (interview with activist).

This part of the DocTeam project 'Contentious Images - Unruly Practices. An Ethnography of Visual Protest Repertoires in Southeastern Europe' aims to elucidate through a media and sociopolitical approach the creation of new political subjectivities in Greece through the protest posters created by activists as "visual expression" of social movements' messages in the urban geography of Athens. Furthermore, by focusing on this unseen aspect of the Greek post-dictatorship political culture and by looking at the contact zones between creative and communicative practices, this subproject seeks to understand the contemporary wave of activism, taking into consideration the evolution of posters as means of propaganda and communication with an explicit focus, however, on the current cycle of contention. Under this lens, it is intended to understand how social movements utilize VPR to communicate their messages by using images (Doerr et al. 2013, xii).

Research Questions and State of the Art

Similar to Roy's (2010) argument that music, as a collective activity, forges social relationships within social movements, I will examine how political posters are utilized as techniques through which radical left groups build a collective sense of identity, resistance and become a device for mobilisation (Chaffee 1993, 133). The study will include everyday life micromobilizations that are not aimed primarily at movement mobilization, but where the preconditions mobilization might be generated in the first place (McCarthy 1996). I follow Johnston and Klandermans (1995, 6) in taking a performative view of culture. The objective is to examine how cultural templates (i.e. posters) are used to make sense of situations and as a basis for action. Social movements are not only political activities; they provide spaces for cultural work, artistic expression and experimentation (Eyerman and Jamison 1998). This PhD focuses on the lived experience of activists in relation to their visual practices. Raymond Williams' (1977, 15) concept of "structure of feeling" is useful because it puts the lived experience of activists at the centre of attention. that is shaped by practices of collective memory where they select some certain meaning and practices while neglecting others.

Recent work on alternative media (Coyer et al. 2007; Atton 2002), radical media (Downing 2000) and community media (Milan 2009; Hollander et al. 2002) show that activists tend to combine 'old' and 'new' media' in their practices. Protest posters have survived the digital tran-

sition and continue to evolve, not only as a form of political communication but also as part of social movement rituals. They have been identified as an important hardware in the cultural toolbox of movements (Taylor and Whittier 1995) that work as carriers of meanings (Jasper 2007) and can incite powerful emotional reactions.

Protest posters consist of images and texts. Both “communicate” quite similarly and can be critically analysed in terms of its visual aspects. They are mostly collectively constructed by the activists and very rarely are a form of individual expression (HKS: 1999, Chaffee 1993). By acknowledging that “image making is power making” (Castells 2009) posters constitute an important set of data for investigating a movement's cultural work (Johnston and Klandermans 1995, 12). This cultural component of collective identity has only seldom been explored.

This PhD project addresses the following questions:

Perspective of the actors: Why and how are old (printed) and new (digital) activists’ media practices combined? Do posters get used and repurposed through the use of digital media in contemporary visual arenas of activism?

Social productivity of visual protest repertoires: How are collective identities are formed in protest movements and how are they evaluated in visual communication?

Urban contextuality: How are posters “read” in the cultural context of a neighborhood of Athens where the practice of putting posters on the walls are an intra-movement form of communication?

Methodology

My conceptual framework provides the theoretical tools to analyse media-oriented practices of radical activists of a social movement scene (Haunss and Leach 2007). Furthermore, a semester of ethnographic fieldwork is needed. The project will be based on a qualitative evaluation of available secondary literature and movement documents that will be placed in the context of the wider social movement actors’ printed material. The analysis will be augmented by semi-structured interviews with activists that create and circulate posters regularly in the urban terrain of Athens, selected through “snowball-sampling”, and participant observation in activists’ assemblies that discuss the process of creating posters. In addition, a selection of posters will be examined that are gathered in official and individual archives.