

Mind the trap: Street art, visual literacy, and visual resistance

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Abstract

Street art is used in political contexts by both powerful players and resistance movements. To understand how images make meaning and are constantly being negotiated between rule and resistance, a visual literacy must be fostered. I have therefore introduced an interdisciplinary methodology for critical visual analysis that allows for the differentiated examination of images in the interplay of rule and resistance and considers the specific features of street art. This analytical framework aims to foster a cross-fertilization between visual culture and political science and more specifically, International Relations.

Keywords: Resistance, Critical Visual Analysis, Visual Culture, Visual Literacy, Street Art, Political Science

1. Introduction

Street art images often come with an aura of resistance. In the media coverage of recent international protests, street art photographs illustrated the *Occupy* movement, the “Arabellion”, or the European financial crisis. The street art produced during the Egyptian revolution is said to have played an important role in the protests (Abaza 2012). It is even thought that the civil war in Syria was triggered by a piece of graffiti in Dara’a (Asher-Shapiro 2016). For it conveys knowledge and narratives – whether historical or contemporary – from the local level across linguistic borders, street art seems to serve as a tool for transnational communication and protest in times of political conflict.

Street art has been recognized as a research subject in numerous academic disciplines (e.g., media and communication studies, cultural and urban studies, anthropology, sociology, and art history). Ironically, one of the few disciplines that does not seem to be interested in investigating the *political* potential of street art is political science. Even though street art is ubiquitous in urban spaces and is frequently used to convey political messages transnationally, often referring to international politics, political science and its sub-discipline International Relations (IR) – tend to marginalize it as a social phenomenon of youth and hip-hop culture. Although in IR the political impact of visual practices is gradually being considered (e.g., Bleiker

2011; 2015; Hansen 2014), there is almost no research on street art as a means of transnational protest communication (one of the few exceptions is Ryan 2016).

In the light of the above, I am asking: What can we learn from street art about visual resistance in the interplay with political power structures? In doing so, I assume that resistance is rarely “pure” but rather stands in a dialectically entangled relationship with power and rule. “Looking is a practice [which] involves learning to interpret and [...] involves relationships of power” (Sturken & Cartwright 2001: 10). Thus, in the face of the political presence of street art, political science must investigate both how street art acts within power structures and how knowledge for critical interpretation can be produced. Because of its seemingly subversive aura, street art is not only being employed by civil society and resistance movements but also by powerful (commercial and state) players who make use of its hipness, street credibility, and resistance chic for propaganda and marketing reasons. It is thus constantly being negotiated between appropriation and re-appropriation. Both viewers and producers might find it hard to interpret the fine nuances of rule and resistance involved. They are at risk of falling into the trap of either (often subtle) political ideology and propaganda or neo-liberal appropriation and depoliticization. Either way, awareness must be increased.

In my research, I contribute to this aim in four ways. First, I introduce street art as a research subject of IR. Second, I intend to refine the theory of visual resistance (and power), which has been developed by scholars in visual culture (e.g., Mirzoeff 2011) to mutually enrich both research fields (IR and visual culture). Third, I have developed an interdisciplinary heuristic of critical visual analysis that allows for a differentiated examination of how images work in the interplay of rule and resistance and considers the specific features of street art. Finally, I aim to shift the focus from a rather disempowering critical perspective towards one that stresses the agency of the social subject and, through visual literacy, empowers it for both an informed critical image consumption and (counter)production.

2. Visual power, visual resistance

In academia, the increasing commercialization and incorporation of street art into the art market has attracted much attention. However, social science concepts of the dialectically entangled relationship between political rule and resistance – in particular from critical and postcolonial theory (e.g., Bhabha 1994; Foucault 1978: 95) – have rarely been applied. Nevertheless, I argue that the use of street art perfectly illustrates the constant negotiation between power and resistance.

Building upon critical theory and cultural studies, scholars in the field of visual culture assume that: “[to] explore the meaning of images is to recognize that they are produced within dynamics of social power and ideology” (Sturken & Cartwright 2001: 21). For visual culture abandons the former



Fig. 1: Avenida de Mayo, Buenos Aires; March 2016; artists: Red Sudakas, Fileteadores del Conurbano, Lucas Quinto, Sergio Condori, Pericles, Eric Chareun, Ruben Minutoli (photo: Lisa Bogerts).

discrimination between “high” and popular culture and blurs the lines between academic disciplines, I argue for further cross-fertilization between IR and visual culture.

However, critical theory can have a rather disempowering effect because it assumes the inescapable involvement of the social subject within power structures and dominant ideology – a perspective that leaves little hope for social change. Visual literacy must stress the agency of the social subject in the constant power struggle and assume that there is always room for counter-hegemonic action by political movements or subversive cultural tactics, especially with the help of images and popular culture (Hall 1993; Gramsci 1971; Sturken & Cartwright 2001: 54, 69).

3. Visual literacy: A methodology

To foster visual literacy one must first be aware of the different levels on which an image makes meaning and subsequently assemble relevant context information. While one level indicates a resistant character, another level might reveal the simultaneous entanglement of the image within power structures. One must thus apply an interdisciplinary multi-level framework for critical visual analysis. Building on Gillian Rose’s (2016) four-level approach (production, the image itself, circulation, and audiencing) as well as other visual methodologies, I suggest the differentiation of seven levels of analysis.

First, on the legal level (*L level*), it is important whether the image is authorized or unlawful and thus self-authorized. Second, regarding the spatial dimension (*S level*), one examines the location and the architectural surface of the image, which might indicate a political purpose and/or symbolic occupation of space. Third, on the level of time (*T level*), one regards the historical moment in which the image was produced and displayed to identify possible political occasions. Fourth, on the material level (*M level*), it is considered whether the technique and the material of the image indicate a political meaning. Fifth, we consider the social position of the producer(s) (*P level*) which entails both the author(s) and, if there are any, the principals/financiers. An anonymous artist might indicate an unauthorized and potentially subversive act in which the producer wishes to remain unknown. Sixth, the iconological content of the image (*I level*) is interpreted in view of the symbolic meaning of both *what* is depicted and *how* it is depicted. On the seventh level, one examines whether the image entails any social, political, or economic reactions by its audience, an

aspect which Rose (2016) calls the audiencing of the image (*A level*).

4. Critical visual analysis: A brief example

To illustrate how this systematic way of approaching street art would work in a real world situation, I provide the example of a street art image¹ from Buenos Aires (Fig. 1). I will analyze the most important features of this image with respect to the seven levels mentioned above.²

Starting with the *L level*, the artwork depicted does not break the law because the owner of the building has been tolerating it since the wall was first painted in 2013.³ Whereas the building is vacant and does not indicate a political meaning in itself (*S level*), it is located in downtown Buenos Aires on Avenida de Mayo (connecting Plaza del Congreso and Plaza de Mayo), which is the hub of political life in Argentina and one of the capital’s main routes for political marches. The image is dated March 24th, 2016 (*T level*), only a few months after the current center-right government led by president Mauricio Macri had ended 12 years of leftist Kirchnerism in Argentina. According to the artists, they repaint the wall every year on the anniversary of the coup d’état that started the last military dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983).⁴ Looking at the material level (*M-level*), we see a large (approx. 12×7m) mural. In Latin America, political muralism is traditionally associated with the populist politics of socialist regimes (e.g., in the Mexican muralism of the 1930s). The mural was painted by several artists and art collectives (see caption Fig. 1) in a participatory community event (*P level*), and was supported by the state workers’ trade union, ATE. Whereas the artists claim to be institutionally independent and do not receive financial support from any party, they mainly identify with (Kirchnerist) Peronism and Latin American leftist regionalism, and are occasionally commissioned by

1. In this article, for the sake of simplicity, I employ the term street art in a broad sense for very different visual media, including murals. However, both artistic features and political self-conceptions vary widely.

2. This example is taken from my PhD thesis (forthcoming) in which I am investigating the case of anti-imperialist visual resistance in Latin American metropolises, namely Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Caracas, and Mexico City.

3. Interview with members of *Red Sudakas* on Nov. 30, 2016, in Buenos Aires.

4. Interview with members of *Red Sudakas* and Lucas Quinto on Nov. 30, 2016, in Buenos Aires.

Kirchnerist-led institutions such as national ministries or municipalities.⁵ Some of the participating artists are involved in international cooperations to promote both their art and political convictions and have thus gained visibility beyond the borders of Argentina.⁶

Regarding the iconology (*I level*), I offer the following interpretation: the image depicts the struggle by “the people” of Latin America symbolized, inter alia, by a *Madre de Plaza de Mayo* and several symbols of native populations such as the sun and the Wiphala rainbow flag in socialist realist style (on the left side). Their resistance is directed against the international finance capital, symbolized by the logotypes of transnational corporations⁷, as well as an eagle (i.e., the USA) and vultures (i.e., vulture funds) operating President Macri like a marionette (on the right side). In the center of the image, the slogan “40 años – ni olvido ni perdón” reminds us of the anniversary of the coup d’état in 1976 as part of the anti-Communist and pro-neoliberal *Operation Condor* in Latin America, which was supported by the CIA and the US government. The slogan “América Latina – ahora o nunca” is the title of a 1967 text by ex-President Juan Perón, the founding father of Peronism, promoting Latin American regional integration for both the preservation and the defense of the continent’s natural resources.⁸ As the artists’

5. Interviews with members of *Red Sudakas* and Lucas Quinto on Nov. 30, 2016, as well as with Sergio Condori and Valeria Orfino on Nov 29, 2016, in Buenos Aires. A notable example of a government-commissioned mural by *Red Sudakas* (and other artists) is the 50 m long “ALCArajo” mural at the *Constitución* train station in Buenos Aires, which depicts heroes of anti-colonialism/(neo)imperialism remembering the 2005 defeat of the *Free Trade Area of the Americas* (ALCA) in Mar de Plata led by Néstor Kirchner and other left-wing presidents such as Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales; <http://cuestionentrriana.com.ar/urribarri-y-tomada-inauguraron-mural-en-constitucion/> (6/19/2017)

6. See for example <http://periodicosic.com.ar/2013/11/13/murales-que-rescatan-la-identidad-latinoamericana/> (6/19/2017)

7. Namely *Monsanto* (agrochemical/-cultural biotechnology), *Shell* (oil and gas), *JP Morgan* (investment banking) and *Barrick* (gold mining) in addition to *Clarín* media group (for the battle over the Argentine media law, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/argentina/10413163/Argentine-court-approves-media-law-forcing-breakup-of-key-critic.html>; 6/20/2017))

8. <http://www.elciudadano.cl/politica/america-latina-ahora-o-nunca-la-doctrina-ecologica-de-juan-domingo-peron/11/18/>

own description suggests, the image is intended to express resistance against Argentina’s international debt (which was questioned by the Kirchner government but is acknowledged by ultra-neoliberal businessman Macri) and the “surrender” of the country – and the whole of Latin America – to the international capitalist market.⁹ With regard to audiencing (*A level*), photographs of the mural have been shared and commented online, not only by the artists themselves but also on social media platforms (with either touristic, artistic, or political backgrounds). According to the artists, the 2015 version of the mural was vandalized by unknowns.¹⁰ In 2016, the repainting of the image was accompanied by the annual March 24 demonstration against the oblivion of the junta’s victims, which was also directed against US interventionism and international debt policy.¹¹ Photographs of the mural appeared in both domestic and international media.¹² Furthermore, the association of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* used a cutout of the angry *madre* (see *I level*) for several mobilization posters e.g., for a resistance march against Macri in August 2016.¹³

Without a doubt, there are – as always in both academia and art – various possible interpretations of the material. To provide reliable findings, a more detailed analysis of the complex content and context is required. Nevertheless, this summary provides an initial insight of how international politics (in particular, Latin American regional identity and integration as well as neo-imperialist political and economic interventionism), frequently interlinked with domestic politics, are negotiated in street art and how resistance is expressed by means of cultural identity. The example also illustrates that the resistant character of an image is often debatable and intertwined with power relations. Although the

(6/19/2017)

9. <http://redsudakas.blogspot.com/2016/03/a-40-anos-del-golpe-civico-militar.html> (6/19/2017)

10. Interview with members of *Red Sudakas* on Nov. 30, 2016, in Buenos Aires.

11. Ibid.

12. See for example <http://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/04/argentinas-economic-recovery-following-macris-visit-to-trump.html> (6/20/2017)

13. <http://madres.org/index.php/vuelve-la-marcha-la-resistencia-viernes-26-agosto-las-17-horas-plaza-mayo/> (6/20/2017); In turn, the conservative newspaper *Clarín* published an online article on memes mocking the image, see https://www.clarin.com/sociedad/memes-Marcha-Resistencia_0_ry4WpWCq.html (6/20/2017).

Kirchnerist party supported by some of the artists employed a discourse of resistance against external interventionism and is now in the opposition, it was in power of the highest government posts until only recently (and was, moreover, often accused of populism and even authoritarianism¹⁴).

5. Mind the trap

With the help of this differentiated methodological framework, images can be analyzed with a special attention to the fine nuances and ambiguities that may be caused by the dialectically entangled relation between rule and resistance. It helps us to understand how street art images are employed for different political purposes and how the trap of misreading or, more precisely, “mislooking”, can be avoided. That is not to say that there are “right” and “wrong” interpretations. Image perception varies according to the individual experiences and knowledge of the observer. The meaning is thus literally in the eye of the beholder. However, it is sometimes difficult to understand the context, intended message, and purpose of an image and to decide upon possible interpretations and reactions. It can thus be helpful to understand *how* images create meaning(s) of the world. On that basis, one can explore tactics that “might offer resistant practices to dominant hegemonic readings of cultural products” (Sturken & Cartwright 2001: 69) i.e., ways of oppositional looking or even counter-action (Hall 1993).

Of course, like every research finding, this methodology can also turn against resistance practices. It can be applied by those powerful players who employ knowledge of street art for their own purposes or even aim to oppress resistance. The German Armed Forces recently asked me to advise their Department of Strategic Communication on street art and graffiti in Afghanistan that “might contain hidden messages for the troops”. Researchers must always be aware of unintended consequences that can put emancipatory activism at risk and thus strengthen forces of control and domination.

Shifting the focus towards the agency of social subjects, this critical approach will help to explore possibilities of how people can challenge or resist dominant ideology with the help of the visual and, in turn, foster awareness for the risk

of both subtle depoliticization and propaganda. Please mind the trap.

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