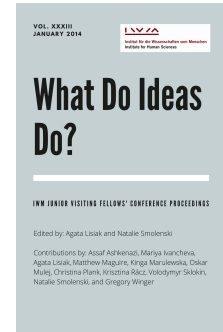


Women in Recent Revolutionary Iconography

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Abstract: The uprisings and protest movements of 2011 (the so-called Arab Spring, indignados, Occupy Wall Street, etc.) have been widely considered groundbreaking because of their leaderless structures. Owing to the absence of unequivocally leading figures, the symbolic and practical role of urban space has been emphasized in popular media and scholarship alike. Next to the widely circulated and discussed images of Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol, and Zuccotti Park, however, another type of image has been prevalent, that of a revolutionary woman. In response to W.J.T. Mitchell's article "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation" (2012), I argue that the reasons for the focus of recent revolutionary imagery on women cannot be reduced to the allegedly feminine character of nonviolence, but are much more complex and entail far-reaching consequences. I engage with two images Mitchell quotes as iconic of the 2011 revolutions – the ballerina from the Occupy Wall Street poster and the "blue bra girl" beaten and disrobed by the military police in Tahrir Square – and discuss their cultural and historical significance. These two images, I argue, represent two major tropes prevalent in revolutionary iconography: woman as a symbol of revolutionary ideals and woman as a symbol of the failure of revolution. Further, I propose that revolutionary images centered on women, both real-life and fictional, belong to what Ariella Azoulay calls the "language of revolution".

Introduction

Hailed repeatedly as the year of global protests,^[1] 2011 was dominated by revolutionary imagery. Inner-city squares and parks filled with chanting crowds, tent towns, barricades, cardboard signs enumerating demands and complaints, gestures of solidarity and love, gestures of defiance and anger, clenched fists, stones and Molotov cocktails flying through tear-gassed air, masked and half-masked faces, faces twisted with pain, faces beaming with euphoria, faces gravely serious, faces saying: enough. Images of revolution – or, as Ariella Azoulay proposes, a "universal language of citizenship and revolution" developed in response to the "universal language of power" ("Language" 3) represented in its extreme form by police and military violence. This language of revolution is hardly new, of course. We recognize its syntax very well. We learned about it in history books. We watched it on television as the cold war world order was drawing to a close. In recent years we saw it in Greece in 2008, in Iran in 2009, in Kashmir in 2010; we saw it again in Greece in 2011, 2012, 2013... We see it in Ukraine in the winter of 2013-2014. We keep seeing it in Egypt.

The language of revolution emerges from gestures performed in a particular place. In the course of 2011 Tahrir, Syntagma, Puerta del Sol, Zuccotti Park, and other inner-city sites became metonymies for protest. Bird's-eye views of crowded squares, close-ups of sites of occupation (tents, makeshift libraries, drum circles), and barricades have permeated media accounts of the protests, both mainstream and grassroots. An open public

square[2] occupied by the people, reclaimed from the regime, becomes both an ideal of a modern-day agora and a strategy for reimagining public space (Berman 197). Immersed in a carnivalesque atmosphere of revolution, the city square turns temporarily into a laboratory of direct democracy and, in the long term, into “the truest monument to revolution” (Michelet 2; Mitchell “Image” 32).

The current focus on urban space as a crucial component of revolution lies not only in its strategic and symbolic functions, but can be also attributed to the apparently leaderless nature of recent protest movements. In his search for a “dominant global image – call it a world picture – that links the Occupy movement to the Arab Spring,” W.J.T. Mitchell argues that what these events had in common was their “conspicuous insistence on an anti-icomic, nonsovereign image repertoire” (“Image” 9). The reasons for protesters’ refusal to have “a representative *face* come forward as the avatar of the revolution” (“Image” 9 – original emphasis) were, as Mitchell notices, partly ideological (rooted in horizontalism[3]) and partly tactical (preventing the police from recognizing such a face). In the absence of a generally acknowledged leader figure of revolution, Mitchell shifts his attention to urban space. Quoting Jules Michelet’s famous study of the French Revolution, he insists that “empty space,” understood as the urban space in which revolutionary events take place and where revolutionary celebrations are performed (i.e., squares, parks, streets), will be the only monument of the 2011 revolutions. Mitchell’s compelling proposal to conceive of the monument not as a statue, but as “the empty space without the statue” (“Image” 19) fits in with the trends in representations of cultural memory prevalent in the last three decades[4]. The empty space as a monument of revolution “is haunted, populated by spirits that refuse to rest, collective and individual memories, a perception that leads toward an opposite reading of the empty space, a transformation of it into a sign of potentiality, possibility, and plenitude, a democracy not yet realized, with the empty public space awaiting a new festival and renewed occupation – a new ‘space of appearance’” (Mitchell, “Image” 21).

While the city square may, indeed, be the only monument emerging from the recent protest movements, it is hardly their only icon. Despite the proclaimed anti-icomic nature of the 2011 events, we have seen countless images of revolution that have achieved iconic status, even if in many cases admittedly short-lived. The language of revolution emerges from gestures performed in a particular place, but it is not bound to this place. The images created in streets and squares travel to other places, both real-life and fictional, and take on new, sometimes entirely different meanings. Some images become recognized as iconic only in their afterlives, after they have been filtered, remade, appropriated; sometimes they make their way back to the empty space they emerged from, be it in the form of a mural, a cardboard sign, a re-enacted gesture or a particular outfit. It is precisely these often surprising and at times all too predictable journeys of revolutionary images that are at the center of the research project I am conducting at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. My work there centers on images featuring women and the subsequent girlification of these images. In contemporary visual culture, revolutionary woman is not a woman, I argue – she is a girl, a rebel girl. I trace the girlification of revolutionary imagery back to various developments in popular culture since the early 1990s that coincided with the rise of third wave feminism. What I want to do in this paper, however, is discuss the

cultural and political contexts of selected popular images within current revolutionary iconography. In response to W.J.T. Mitchell, I elaborate on the meanings of the two images of women he singles out in his 2012 article “Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation”: the Occupy Wall Street ballerina and the “woman in a blue bra.” Specifically, I argue that within what Azoulay calls the “universal language of revolution,” images of women represent both the aspirations and failures of revolutionary strivings.

Interpreting Revolution through Images

When I talk about revolutionary imagery, I do not mean that all the events and movements that produce it must be revolutionary in the classical academic understanding of the term[5]. They could be protests, occupations, revolts, uprisings, or other forms of dissent that may not even aspire to find a name for themselves. Regardless of how they are labeled, these events often have much in common: they appropriate specific revolutionary imagery to convey their ideals, goals, or demands; they speak the language of revolution. Academic definitions of revolution turn out to be limiting and insufficient because the processes or phenomena they strive to describe constantly evolve. If we move away from rigid terminologies and shed the preconceptions they entail[6], we may be able to re-conceptualize revolution in a way that will yield a better understanding of an entire range of phenomena hitherto excluded from detailed analyses. Rather than playing the tired game of passing judgments on what behavior or what movement is revolutionary, I propose that we accept that various forms of human togetherness exercised, in Arendtian sense[7], through speech and action may include revolutionary features and that these features very often manifest themselves through images. In my approach I agree with Ariella Azoulay, who says that the way the term “revolution” is used by theoreticians “produces its rareness and superiority over other forms of being-together that could *mistakenly* be perceived as similar to it – revolt, rebellion, uprising, coup, solidarity, movement, partnership, participation or protest” (“Revolution” – original emphasis). The inclusive take on revolution advocated by Azoulay is not only immensely inspiring, but also strikes me as particularly valid in the light of recent protest movements because it allows for conceiving of revolution “less as a targeted occurrence, demarcated in time and space, and more as a collection of civil statements and formations” (“Revolution”).

No revolution – and no other complex event for that matter – can ever be reduced to one single image. The symbolic and functional relevance of “empty space” in recent protest movements does not diminish the importance of other iconic images. Regardless of whether a revolution acquires a face (Lenin, Ché), a martyr’s body (Marat, Neda Agha Soltan), or an allegory (Liberty, Germania), the people who actually make it happen and the space in which it happens also convey symbolic meanings, either instantly or over time. The French Revolution had its Goddess of Liberty, but also market women marching on Versailles *and* “empty space” (the Champs de Mars, in Michelet’s famous reading). The Paris Commune had its *pétroleuses* (women communardes accused of arson) *and* the barricades. The October Revolution had Lenin *and* the storming of the Winter Palace. The imagery of recent protest movements, most famously the so-called Arab Spring and

Occupy Wall Street, includes people in the crowd *and* the urban space that enables their performance of togetherness; it also features posters, street art, performance art, cartoons, and slogans that represent various stages and aspects of revolution.

If a revolution cannot be reduced to one image, can distinguishing a few images from millions of photos, videos, posters, murals, cartoons, and internet memes be anything but arbitrary? Reluctant to shy away from the challenge, Mitchell proposes to simply divide revolutionary images into two categories: positive and negative. The former are images of “triumphal defiance and joy” (Mitchell, “Image” 15) such as *Adbusters*’ ballerina poster; the latter depict humiliation and state violence exemplified by a still frame from an amateur YouTube video showing a young woman severely beaten and partially disrobed by the Egyptian security forces, her blue brassière revealed. Mitchell’s choice of images centered on women is hardly accidental; the explanation he offers, however, does not seem entirely convincing.

In Mitchell’s view, the images of the ballerina and the woman in a blue bra are particularly important because “the whole tactic of nonviolence has an inherently feminine and feminist connotation, a striking contrast to the macho violence it elicits” (“Image” 16). While it is true that recent revolutionary movements have been mostly peaceful on the part of the protesters, by equating nonviolence with femininity Mitchell dismisses historical and contemporary representations of women as aggressive, possessed, and sadistic. Particularly within revolutionary iconography women have been prominently featured as fighters, soldiers, assassins, and arsonists – some hailed heroines and saints, others denounced as terrorists. Dubbed Erinyes, Medusas or Maenads by their opponents, women participants of revolutions and protest movements have often been associated with violence in its wildest, bloodiest, most unpredictable forms[8]. Mitchell himself discusses this prominent tendency in his 1986 *Iconology*, in which he engages with Edmund Burke’s denouncement of French revolutionary women as “furies of hell” and his insistence on stressing “the sexual, and particularly the feminine character of the violence” (143).

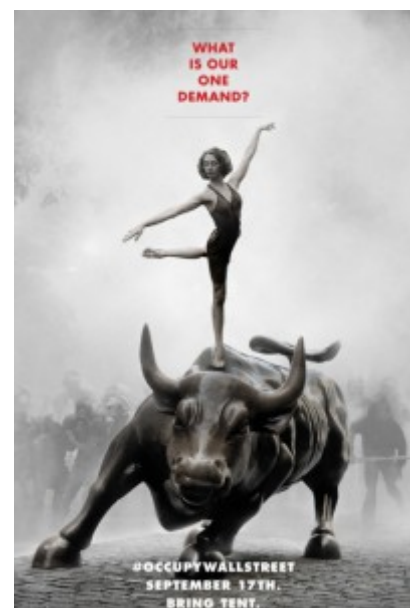
Portrayals of revolutionary violence exercised by or attributed to women are rarely neutral. Female acts of violence tend to be either juxtaposed with women’s physical beauty or mirrored by their ugliness. The latter trend is particularly evident in popular caricatures and anti-revolutionary propaganda;[9] the former has been widespread across various forms of literary and visual expression. Juxtapositions of feminine beauty with violence can be found in history books, novels, poetry, feature film, media reports, essays, and visual arts. Theroigne de Mericourt was degraded from an adored symbol of revolutionary beauty to a symbol of revolutionary madness (Janion 31) and later described by Charles Baudelaire as a “mistress of bloodshed” (qtd. in Gutwirth 326). The Russian revolutionary, Maria Spiridonova, known primarily for assassinating a police official, has been praised in history books for her “spiritually beautiful face” (Petrusenko 136). Leila Khaled became internationally famous for hijacking planes, but also for a black-and-white photograph in which she is seen holding a kalashnikov: ever since the image traveled across the world, she has been referred to as a “pin-up” of Palestinian

armed struggle and “the glamour girl of international terrorism” (Nacos 221). The artist Amer Shomali poignantly comments on Khaled’s glamourization in his 2011 work, “The Icon”: a portrait of the Palestinian fighter made of 3500 lipsticks.

As much as I agree with Mitchell on the central role of women in representations of recent revolutionary movements, I find it important to stress that their iconic role cannot be reduced to a supposedly feminine characteristic of nonviolence. Rather, in keeping with the binary opposition Mitchell draws in his analysis, the ballerina and the woman attacked by the Egyptian military police represent two major tropes prevalent in revolutionary iconography: woman as a symbol of revolutionary ideals and woman as a symbol of the failure of revolution.

Woman as Revolutionary Aspiration

The ballerina poster was created and distributed online by *Adbusters*, a Canadian non-profit organization running, among other things[10], a magazine with a strong anti-consumerist and ecological agenda. The poster first appeared, together with the #OCCUPYWALLSTREET twitter hashtag, on July 13, 2011 (Yardley B1), almost two months before first tents were stretched in Zuccotti Park. It was a call to occupation, an attempt at creating a meme that would mobilize people to stand up together against the forces responsible for much of the recent economic crisis and social inequality, forces exemplified dramatically by the Leviathan of Wall Street. The poster is black-and-white save for the question “what is our one demand?” spelled at the top in red capital letters. The grayness of the picture strengthens the impression that the scene it depicts is clouded in tear gas. The mass of black-clad protesters emerges from behind the thick air, some of them wearing gas masks, others protecting their faces with bandanas. They came prepared and are now charging, led by the ballerina dancing on the Wall Street Bull[11]. The unlikely pair – the slender dancer and the raging beast – seems caught in a freeze frame. What is going to happen after this moment passes? Will the bull throw the ballerina off his shoulder blade in a single gesture of impatience? Will he charge and kidnap the young woman, thus reenacting the Zeus and Europa myth? Or will he stand there, crushed into obedience by the nearly weightless touch of her feet?



Occupy Wall Street poster by Adbusters.

Despite the strength and rage the bull radiates, the ballerina appears utterly unimpressed. She is focused on her dance moves, perfecting her posture, keeping her balance against all odds. She is neither looking at the bull, nor at the crowd behind her. Nor is she looking into the future located, typically in political poster art, somewhere in one of the top corners of the picture. Unlike propaganda posters, she does not look us in the eye. She

seems oblivious to what is happening around her (is it sass? is it zen?), yet she inspires the crowds. Her leadership is effortless. If her slight frame has tamed the bull, what do the stick-wielding men charging behind her have to fear?

The *Abusters* poster is a take on Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). The ballerina steps on the bull's back just as Liberty is about to step over the bodies of fallen soldiers of the regime she invites the people to topple. The Parisian street is covered in smoke just as the New York scene is covered in tear gas. The leading figure of the woman in both pictures is followed by raging masses of men wielding weapons. There are two important differences, however. First, Liberty carries a gun while the ballerina is unarmed – a gesture that could be understood as an endorsement of nonviolent protest if it weren't for the ballerina's followers carrying clubs and bracing for a fight. Second, Liberty looks encouragingly at her people while the ballerina does not seem to be looking anywhere in particular. Why, then, do the men follow her? Could it be that the vagueness of the ballerina's gestures stands for the Occupy movement's deliberate lack of a clear agenda? Could it be that only an allegory that seems as utterly indefinable as *Abusters'* ballerina can represent a movement that tries to escape all preexisting classifications? Could it be that the ballerina, with her grace and refinement, embodies the unpronounced one demand? Is the one demand human dignity?



Liberty Leading the People by Eugène Delacroix.

The ballerina is ethereal and strong, a city girl in her element on the street, just as Liberty – embodied by a young “woman of the people” (Hobsbawm 122) dressed like a disheveled Greek goddess – is in her element on the barricades of Paris. Both allegories are urban and, as such, make us take the city as a site of revolution for granted. Both evoke strength, firmness, and beauty. There is not a tinge of indecision in their postures, they are unconflicted about the struggle they inspire the people to undertake. They embody the early stage of revolution, when enthusiasm overpowers doubt and violence has not yet escalated to the point of becoming unbearable – and thus still seems justified.

The OWS ballerina may be easily granted entry to the pantheon of female allegories of revolution. Like her predecessors, she is an anonymous woman embodying eternal values, an attractive, inspiring figure. Unlike her oldest sister Marianne^[12], however, she is not part of the “masquerade of equality” (Landes 132): her central position in the poster is not a cynical attempt to make up for women's actual exclusion from politics simply because women's involvement in revolutionary movements is now unquestionable. Women's participation in recent and ongoing protests has been widely and excitedly discussed in popular media and academia alike. In his bestselling *Why It's Still Kicking Off Everywhere* (2013), Paul Mason enthusiastically announces that “the ‘archetypal’ protest

leader, organizer, facilitator, spokesperson now is an educated young woman” (272). Strikingly, women’s involvement in revolutionary movements seems to be widely perceived and referred to as a miracle, a sudden, unexpected breakthrough. This is particularly true of the discourses on women of the so-called Arab Spring – as Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi notice (684), the narratives accompanying reports on 2011 uprisings across Northern Africa and the Middle East were permeated with gasps of surprise not only at women’s activism, but even at their sheer presence in public space. A sobering voice, like that of Hamid Dabashi’s, is much needed to remind us that

those women on Tahrir or Azadi Square, active agents in a world-historic succession of events, did not emerge from nowhere. They are the voices and visages cultivated in the public domain for decades and centuries. It has taken relentless and tireless work to enable these women and girls to show the courage, the imagination, and above all the audacity to come out on the streets to demand their rights (189).

Woman as Revolutionary Victim

Whereas women’s involvement in protests and uprisings is undeniable, it is also true that women often suffer the worst backlash once the revolution is over, regardless of whether it has failed or succeeded. Women have repeatedly played the role of “firebrands” of revolution (Godineau 16): the market women marching on Versailles in 1789; women factory workers taking to the streets of Petrograd in February 1917; Henryka Krzywonos stopping the tram in Gdańsk in August 1980 in support of the shipyard strike; or Asmaa Mahfouz encouraging people via her vlog to join her on Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, to mention only a few. Equally repeatedly, women end up among the first victims of a post-revolutionary order. Over and over again, in France, Mexico, Algeria, Nicaragua, Central Europe, among many other places, women’s rights were dramatically limited and their participation in political life substantially marginalized once the revolutionary forces had become the new governing power.[13] Valentine Moghadam distinguishes two types of revolution depending on their gender outcomes: one is modernizing and egalitarian and quotes women’s emancipation as its explicit goal; the other is patriarchal, stressing gender differences and women’s role in the family (“Gender and Revolutions” 137). Yet even the so-called modernizing revolutions, like the October Revolution or the Nicaraguan Revolution, after initial improvements for hitherto suppressed groups including women, eventually led to serious repercussions for the latter.[14] Post-revolutionary suppression of women and violence against them are well-documented and much-theorized phenomena.[15] Already the French revolutionary Olympe de Gouge famously lamented: “O my poor sex! O women who have gained nothing from the Revolution!” (qtd. in Moghadam, “Gender and Revolutions” 144). Her cry echoes in Cairo today.

The image of the Egyptian “woman in a blue bra” represents the failure of revolutionary ideals. Taken on Tahrir in December 2011, nearly a year after Egyptians successfully occupied the square and eventually ousted the oppressive Mubarak regime, the amateur video depicts one of countless examples of police brutality directed at civilians in general and, in its sexualized form, at women in particular. The short clip shot from a

considerable distance centers initially on three young people, two men and one woman, running away from the armed police. We don't know for sure if they are protesters or if they just happened to be in the area during the police attack, but keeping in mind the popular recognition of Tahrir as a site of peaceful demonstrations, it is reasonable to assume they are indeed protesters. The girl stumbles and falls, one of the young men tries to help her up, but the police instantly club him down; the third person gets away, or so we hope – he runs away and is then out of the frame.



A still from the amateur video depicting the "woman in a blue bra".

Police batons and heavy boots land indiscriminately and with full force on various parts of the young bodies. After receiving several blows in the head, the girl is dragged by her arms, her robe lifted thus covering her face and exposing her torso. Her blue bra is not armor, it does not protect her from the final kick she receives in the chest. W.J.T. Mitchell writes that the young woman "does not fight back but compels the police to play their part in the tableau of active nonviolence" ("Image" 16). My concern with Mitchell's statement is that this may not be a calculated decision on her part: she appears to be unconscious and may simply not be able to fight back. She likely is not making a statement against violence – she is immobilized by it. As the police start to disperse in pursuit of new victims, one of the policemen pulls the abaya back over the girl's upper body. It could have been interpreted as an attempt at decency had it not so horribly resembled the act of shrouding.

In Tahrir and beyond, "women were not only at the forefront of the revolutionary uprisings. They were also its first and foremost victims – the first targets of the brutal repression that those in power launched against the uprising" (Dabashi 186). The brutal abuse of the "girl in the blue bra" is, sadly, only one of myriad instances of post-revolutionary violence, but probably most widely discussed owing to its nearly instant symbolic significance. The day after the assault, thousands of women took to the streets of Cairo protesting against police brutality. They marched holding print outs of a single frame from the YouTube video showing the partly unrobed woman being beaten by the police. The "blue bra girl"[16], as the media labeled the anonymous victim, instantly became both a symbol of the failed Egyptian uprising and an example of brutality against women.

The still frame lent itself to the creation of many renditions. Most prominently, it inspired several murals in Cairo. The street art pieces devoted to the assault on the "blue bra girl" were altered not only by weather conditions, but also, characteristically for the genre, transformed by various interventions. One of the murals depicts a young woman lying on the ground, wearing a black headscarf, a blue bra, and a pair of blue jeans. She lifts up her arm to her face, tries to shield herself from the batons and boots of the three policemen standing above her. The woman's bare midriff is juxtaposed with the police armor. The

men's faces are invisible from underneath their helmets. In one of the first renditions of the mural, someone sprayed red eyes on the helmet shields thus making the police resemble demons, which, in retrospect, can be seen as the beginning of their transformation into bloodthirsty beasts. In the versions of the mural that followed, the police are depicted as devils, with red horns and red pointy tails. The woman's torso is covered, painted over with black paint, her blue bra replaced with the Egyptian flag.

Still, it is the blue bra that holds the general imagination in its grasp. It illustrates “the proximity between the day-to-day events and their translation into visual signs, and the distribution and transformation of these signs by varying media” (Hyldig Dal 233). Not just the entire scene of assault, but the brassière itself has become a symbol. Detached from the woman's body, it found its way to the walls of Cairo as a stencil, sometimes accompanied by a footprint that reads: “long live a peaceful revolution”.^[17] Reproduced countless times, it has



A mural in Cairo depicting the military police assault on the “blue bra girl”.

engraved itself not only in the minds of the people who walk the streets of Egypt's capital, but became recognizable also among a wider public owing to its dissemination via social media (it became #bluebra in no time). Unmistakably associated with police violence, the blue bra became “a central icon for expressing dissent” (Abaza 250), often in the form of graffiti and murals painted on the walls and cement blocks across the city, most prominently in Mohamed Mahmoud Street^[18] and Tahrir Square. One of said pieces authored by the graffiti artist El Teneen depicts a charging Supergirl^[19] wearing a blue bra and a red superheroine cape. The red letter on her chest – *tha'* – stands for *thawra*: revolution. The sign accompanying the graffiti promises: “it continues”.

The blue bra clearly possesses an overwhelmingly iconic quality. If it can function as a symbol on its own, detached from the original picture and, by implication, from its owner's body, we may be tempted to ask if it wasn't the piece of garment in the first place that earned the YouTube video so much attention. I wonder whether the original image would have resonated as powerfully had it not been for the bright color of the young woman's bra. After all, the anonymous protester became known not as a “woman in a bra,” but as a “woman in a blue bra” or a “blue bra girl”. In a bleak scene like the one caught on the amateur camera in Tahrir, even the tiniest tinge of color draws the viewer's attention. It is almost impossible to avert the gaze: the spectator's eyes stubbornly focus on the blue bra; the piece of lingerie becomes the center of the picture. Similarly, when we look at the famous sequence of four pictures taken during the protests in Istanbul in 2013, it is the woman in a red dress who captures our attention, not the pepper-spraying police, not the other young woman who is in the foreground in the first three pictures, not the camera man in the blue plaid shirt who appears in the fourth image. The red-clad woman became one of the most prominent icons of the Gezi Park protests, received a cheesy nickname (Lady in Red), and, predictably, inspired various street art pieces, internet

cartoons, and posters. Here, again, I venture to say the photo wouldn't have drawn so much attention, wouldn't have lent itself to so many renditions, had the protestor been dressed in less vivid colors. Red, of course, has long been a color associated with revolution. A woman in a red dress has appeared in various pictures representing revolution, most prominently in crowd scenes such as Diego Rivera's 1931 fresco, "The Uprising". As the blue bra case clearly demonstrates, however, revolutionary imagery's palette also features colors other than red. As the visual language of revolution develops, it naturally acquires new elements, including new colors. Whereas the color blue on its own is unlikely to be associated with revolution in general[20], in 2011 the blue bra entered the visual lexicon of revolution and remains there alongside the Occupy ballerina, the Guy Fawkes mask, the clenched fist, as well as countless other objects, gestures, and slogans.

The protests on Tahrir Square in early 2011, the eighteen glorious days that ended in Mubarak's resignation, were partly inspired by the popular uprising in Tunisia that started in December of 2010. What later came to be known as the Arab Spring – a series of protests and uprisings across the region – was in turn inspirational for a number of protest movements elsewhere in the world: the *indignados* in Spain, the student protests in Chile, and Occupy Wall Street (soon followed by other Occupies), to name only a few. Although scattered across the globe, these movements had much in common beyond the "empty space" Mitchell encourages us to focus on and possibly even beyond the universal language of revolution Azoulay talks about. The 2011 protests, and those that have followed, share countless images across various genres (poster art, street art, video, performance, photography, installation, etc.) that speak to each other, images that, I argue, become as much part of the language of revolution as the Molotov cocktail and the barricade.



Gezi Park protests.

As Susan Buck-Morss notices, it is visual culture rather than a spoken or written language, that has become protesters' lingua franca: "without language in common, the global public sphere [has] to rely heavily on images" (339). The clenched fist, for example, is universally read as a sign of radicalization. When African-American sprinters, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raised their fists on the podium during the Olympic Games in Mexico City in 1968, it was recognized in the United States as a Black Power salute. The local audience, however, was able to interpret it as a gesture of solidarity with the protesting students shot by the military on the streets of Mexico City. In this sense, "the imagined community of the 1960s was indeed a global social movement. Political solidarity transcended national boundaries" (Buck-Morss 339). Buck-Morss focuses on gestures, but the same could be argued of images that do not necessarily rely on gestures. These images do not have to mean exactly the same thing in each of the places in which

they appear; they do not have to be identical – the important thing is that they share a certain sensitivity and understanding of politics. The image of the ballerina is a case in point.

The Wall Street ballerina and the “blue bra girl” seem to be worlds apart, and not only because they represent entirely different moments in the revolution. The dancer is an imaginary person, allegorical, even magical, a poster girl designed by former advertising experts trying to fight big corporate machinery with its own tools. She radiates beauty and strength and seduces her audience into following the call to occupation. She inspires without taking any risks. The woman in the blue bra is real, clubbed to the ground and beaten into unconsciousness. Her embodied suffering enraged thousands of Egyptians. She became inspirational not because of a cleverly designed strategy, but accidentally. The scene of her assault was reproduced and reimagined in various forms across the city and on the internet. The image’s presence in Cairo’s urban landscape serves as a daily reminder of revolutionary ideals gone awry.

Conclusion: The Language of Revolution

Some time in early 2012, a mural depicting a ballerina appeared in Cairo. It is not exactly the OWS ballerina, but, knowing the *Adbusters* poster, it is tempting to think of her as an important point of reference. The ballerina in Mohamed Mahmoud Street is wearing a dress instead of a leotard; her hair is pulled back in a bun instead of circling her face; she is depicted in color rather than in black-and-white. Unlike her New York counterpart, the Cairo ballerina faces her male companion, a protester waving a red flag. At first glance, they appear to be dancing with each other. If we look closer, however, we notice that the ballerina and the protester are each other’s mirror reflections. The masked man, though braced for a fight, may, indeed, be a graceful, beautiful dancer. And, conversely, the elegant ballerina may be communicating her defiance, demanding change, radiating dissent.



A mural in Cairo by the artists Shaza Khaled and Aliaa El Tayeb (2012).

Even if it was not the ballerina on the bull that inspired the mural in Cairo, the juxtaposition of a female dancer and a masked male protester clearly seems to speak to the imagination of protesters across the world. According to blog posts devoted to street art in Egypt, the mural by the artists Shaza Khaled and Aliaa El Tayeb was inspired by a photoshopped image of a Greek protester dancing with a ballerina.^[21] The resurfacing of the ballerina image in various cultural and political contexts – most recently on the Maidan^[22] – supports my claim that, regardless of their multifarious forms, visual expressions (photography, poster art, street art, etc.) embedded in revolutionary aesthetics belong to the universal language of revolution along with its other statements:

dumpsters lying upside down in the street, wooden or metal planks placed diagonally to create shelter, hands raised in the victory sign, singing with strangers, throwing stones, graffiti on flags, uprooting of existing power symbols, overtaking thoroughfares, climbing on top of tall buildings or cars to make a show of presence there, spreading out in forbidden or designated spaces, taking over power accessories and neutralizing them, the civilian use of military means, setting fire, damaging portraits of rulers, giving testimony about the acts of the governing power, and so on. (Azoulay, “Language of Revolution” 2)

The universal language of revolution is not static: it constantly acquires new elements. Its evolution is both firmly rooted historically and sensitive to new developments in global visual culture. In recent years, we have been witnessing a resurgence of images centered on young women, which, as I argue, is related in part to the long tradition of depicting women as revolutionary allegories, on the one hand, and revolution’s foremost victims, on the other. In revolutionary iconography today, women are embodiments both of revolution’s highest aspirations and its lowest failures. The woman as a symbol of revolution transcends earthly limitations, inspires crowds, symbolizes revolutionary ideals, awes with her beauty, and speaks the unspeakable. The woman as a symbol of the failure of revolution is rendered speechless, choking on her own blood or beaten into unconsciousness, or reduced to a single gesture, color, or piece of clothing. The image of woman as a symbol of revolution, regardless of whether she entices people to revolt or provokes outrage because of her suffering at the hands of the oppressive regime, functions prominently, alongside countless images depicting women’s participation – or, as Mason argues, women’s key role – in recent protests movements, as part of the visual language of revolution spoken across the globe.

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[1] See, e.g., Mason 2013.

[2] Zuccotti Park is a remarkable and telling exception: with its status of a “private-public partnership” (a globally widespread form of neoliberalization of urban space), the park was beyond the restrictions applying to regular municipal parks in New York. Its special status paradoxically facilitated the round-the-clock occupation.

[3] See, e.g., Sitrin 2012.

[4] Rather than telling us what to think, the anti- or counter-monument allows us to make up our own minds about the issue it represents and lets us develop an individual emotional response; see, e.g., the works of Sol Lewitt, Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Horst Hoheisel; for more on counter-monuments see James E. Young (1992).

[5] For definitions of revolution by now considered “classical,” see, e.g., Arendt 1990; Skocpol 1979, 1994; Halliday 1999; Kumar 2001; Foran 2005.

[6] This has been wonderfully accomplished by Lisa Robertson and Matthew Stadler in their exquisite *Revolution: A Reader* (2012).

[7] See Arendt 1998.

[8] See, e.g., Gutwirth 1992; Janion 2006.

[9] See, e.g., Godineau 1988; Gutwirth 1992; Paulson 1983.

[10] For a detailed description of *Adbusters'* activities see their homepage: www.adbusters.org.

[11] The statue conceived and produced by the artist Arturo Dimodica as “a symbol of virility and courage” has since come to stand for Gordon Gekko-style greed. Interestingly, the statue was not commissioned by the city of New York, but was created on Dimodica’s individual initiative and deposited, in a guerrilla art mode, in front of the stock exchange before it was moved to Bowling Green Park. See: <http://chargingbull.com/chargingbull.html>.

[12] The French Revolution had a woman for its symbol, but did not offer women any substantial rights – they were declared “passive citizens” and had thus no right to vote. The few rights they won during the revolution – the right to initiate and obtain divorce, for example – were soon restrained under Napoleon and completely abolished during the Restoration. Already in the course of the French Revolution it became clear that despite her appearance Liberty was not actually a woman: she was a goddess who replaced the king as an image of the nation (see Landes 2001).

[13] See, e.g., Moghadam 1997; Gutwirth 1992; Godineau 1993.

[14] See, e.g., Navailh 1994; Kampwirth 2004.

[15] See, e.g., Moghadam 1997, 2002; Gutwirth 1992.

[16] The phrase “blue bra girl” appeared in several major media outlets (e.g., “The ‘Girl In The Blue Bra” on NPR, 21 December 2011; “Blue bra girl’ rallies Egypt’s women vs. oppression” on CNN, 22 December 2011) as well as in the titles of YouTube videos depicting the assault (it is always the same video, but reposted on various YouTube channels).

[17] The blue bra stencil is authored by Bahia Shehab and part of her street art project “A Thousand Times No.”

[18] A street in central Cairo, close to Tahrir Square, the site of clashes between civilians and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). The walls of the buildings located on the street and cement blocks erected by the military became the canvas for street art, “a holistic urban art project” initiated in early 2012 by the Revolutionary Artists’ Union (Ettmueller 265). “Mohamed Mahmoud Street, the scene of violent clashes in the fall of 2011, has become a grassroots memorial space with a constantly changing mural wall that responds to political events sometimes immediately” (Elshahed 24).

[19] The artist himself refers to the image not as Wonder Woman, but Supergirl:
<https://twitter.com/ElTeneen/status/201070633860337664/photo/1>.

[20] It is worth noting, however, that several revolutions have been named after colors and/or flowers – e.g., the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar (2007), the Green Revolution in Iran (2009), the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia (2010), etc. – which means that in various places and in various times colors other than red dominate the revolutionary palette.

[21] See, e.g., *suzeinthecity* 2012.

[22] My IWM colleague, Kateryna Mishchenko, drew my attention to an impromptu performance in Kiev in December 2013 featuring a young ballerina dancing in a communal bedroom where Maidan protesters rested. Here is one of the photographs documenting the event: <http://f-page.ru/fp/01a648d83de2448ba3d33b6833cb8504>.

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