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author:

Agata Lisiak

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Agata Lisiak

The Ballerina and the Blue Bra: Femininity in Recent Revolutionary Iconography

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"² represented in its extreme form by police and military violence. This language of revolution is not new, of course. We readily recognize its syntax. We learned about it in history books. We watched it on television as the Cold War world order was drawing to a close. We saw it recently, in Greece in 2008, in Iran in 2009, in Kashmir in 2010. We saw it again in Greece in 2011, 2012, 2013... We just saw it in Ukraine. We keep seeing it in Egypt.

Occupied public space³ has come to constitute one of the basic elements of the language of revolution, to the point that in recent years Tahrir, Syntagma, Puerta del Sol, Gezi Par, Taksim Square, Zuccotti Park, and Maidan have become, among other urban sites, metonymies for protest. The current preoccupation with urban space as a crucial component of the language 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 2012 article "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," W.J.T. Mitchell argues that what these events have in common is their "conspicuous insistence on an anti-iconic, non-sovereign image repertoire."⁴ The reasons for protesters' refusal to have "a representative *face* come forward as the avatar of the revolution" are, as Mitchell notes,⁵ partly ideological (rooted in horizontalism⁶) and partly tactical (preventing police from recognizing such a face). Searching for a "dominant global image – call it a world

picture – that links the Occupy movement to the Arab Spring;⁷ Mitchell 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.⁸

While the city square may, indeed, be the only monument emerging from recent protest movements, it is hardly their only icon. In the course of 2011 and later, countless images of revolution achieved iconic status, even if in many cases it was admittedly short-lived. 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,"⁹ such as *Adbusters'* ballerina poster for Occupy Wall Street; the latter depict humiliation and state violence, as exemplified by a still frame from an amateur YouTube video showing a woman severely beaten and partially disrobed by Egyptian security forces, revealing her blue brassiere. Mitchell's choice of images centered on women is hardly accidental, but the explanation he offers – namely, the allegedly feminine connotations of nonviolence – does not seem entirely convincing. Picking up where Mitchell leaves off, I want to discuss the role of women in recent revolutionary iconography as embodiments of both revolutionary ideals and revolutionary failures. Mitchell's article is worth engaging with not only as one of the first scholarly attempts to make sense of the iconography of recent revolutions, and as a thought-provoking piece of writing, but also because some arguments the author seems to rush through invite a more careful analysis. What follows is a polemic with the part of Mitchell's article in which he talks about women and revolution, and an elaboration on some of the important observations he makes. I will read Mitchell's discussion of the dialectic between positive and negative images of revolution in relation to Azoulay's notion of a universal language of revolution.

Interpreting Revolution Through Images

Instead of playing the tired game of passing judgments on what behavior or what movement passes for revolutionary, I propose that we accept that various forms of human togetherness exercised (in an Arendtian sense) through speech and action

may include revolutionary features, and that these features very often manifest themselves through images. I agree with Azoulay that the way the term "revolution" is currently 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."¹⁰

If we move away from rigid terminologies and shed the preconceptions they entail,¹¹ 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. The inclusive take on revolution advocated by Azoulay is not only immensely inspiring, but also strikes me as particularly valid in 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."¹²

Azoulay talks about the gestures that constitute the language of revolution as if they were snapshots (which, in fact, they often are), freeze-frames of a revolutionary situation. Despite her focus on the visual, however, the author makes it clear that revolution is enacted and perceived with all senses: it includes sensations that are auditory (chants, police sirens, screaming), tactile (the feeling of being in the crowd, the pressure of water cannon streams, the burning caused by pepper spray), and olfactory (the smell of burnt tires, the smell of food cooked in community kitchens).¹³ When looking into revolutionary iconography it is thus important to remember that the language of revolution operates beyond the realm of vision; pictures are vital, but they do not tell us everything.

A careful consideration of revolutionary iconography can be instructive for several reasons. First, it is impossible not to notice similarities between the images depicting various revolutionary situations around the world. For instance, if it were not for the national flags waved by protesters, it would have been next to impossible to discern exactly which places are depicted in the bird's eye views of occupied streets and squares. A visual analysis of these images encourages us to notice similarities between various protest movements regardless of their agendas and to thereby discover meanings that would have been lost on us had the revolutionary situations been regarded individually. Second, the language of

revolution, as Azoulay argues, emerges from gestures performed in a particular place, but it is not bound to that 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. A close observation of these often surprising and sometimes all too predictable journeys of revolutionary images yields a better understanding of the origin and development of symbols, gestures, and behaviors associated with revolution. Further, analysis of revolutionary iconography is important because it is visual culture rather than spoken or written language that is the protesters' lingua franca: "without language in common, the global public sphere [has] to rely heavily on images."¹⁴ Revolutionary 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.

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; they acquire them either instantly or over time. The French Revolution had its Goddess of Liberty, but also market women marching on Versailles *and* "empty spaces" (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 Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, includes people in the crowd *and* the urban space that enables their performance of togetherness. Besides the pictures of occupied squares, depictions of state violence (ranging from pepper spray to torture and sniper attacks), and the ubiquitous figure of a masked male protester throwing a Molotov cocktail or a stone, one of the most prevalent images in recent revolutionary situations across the world has been that of a woman as a symbol of revolution.

Women have been present in revolutionary iconography for centuries, both as allegories and as participants. What we are witnessing at the moment is

a resurgence of the image of a woman as a symbol of revolution. As Eric Hobsbawm notes, whereas in the 18th and 19th centuries, "the revolutionary concept of republic or liberty ... tended to be a naked, or more likely bare-breasted, female," the role of the female figure "diminishes sharply with the transition from the democratic-plebeian revolutions of the 19th century to the proletarian and socialist movements of the 20th."¹⁵ The beginning of the 21st century marks the end of the masculinization of revolutionary imagery Hobsbawm talks about.¹⁶ It is not that the figure of a male protester or crowds of men disappear altogether; rather, they are complemented, and sometimes juxtaposed, with the figure of a female revolutionary or woman as a symbol of revolution. The reappearance of women in current revolutionary imagery invites close comparative analysis. In this article, I focus on the two images Mitchell singles out, keeping in mind that they are representative of a broader phenomenon.

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."¹⁷ 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 as heroines and saints, others denounced as terrorists. Dubbed Erinyes, Medusas or Maenads by their opponents, female participants of revolutions and protest movements have often been associated with violence in its wildest, bloodiest, and most unpredictable forms. 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."¹⁸

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. As Dominique Godineau, Madelyn Gutwirth, and Ronald Paulson, among others, demonstrate, the latter trend is particularly evident in popular caricatures and anti-revolutionary propaganda, while the former

is widespread across history books, novels, poetry, feature film, media reports, essays, and visual art.¹⁹ Theroigne de Mericourt was degraded from an adored symbol of revolutionary beauty to a symbol of revolutionary madness²⁰ and later described by Charles Baudelaire as a "mistress of bloodshed."²¹ The Russian revolutionary, Maria Spiridonova, known primarily for assassinating a police official, has been praised in history books for her "spiritually beautiful face."²² 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 the "pin-up" of the Palestinian armed struggle and "the glamour girl of international terrorism."²³ The artist Amer Shomali poignantly comments on Khaled's glamourization in his 2011 work entitled "The Icon," a portrait of the Palestinian fighter made up of 3500 tubes of lipstick.

As much as I agree with Mitchell about 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 the supposedly feminine connotations of nonviolence. Rather, in keeping with the dichotomies 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.

Women as Embodiments of Revolution's Ideals

The ballerina poster was created and distributed online by *Adbusters*, a Canadian non-profit organization running, among other things, a magazine with a strong anti-consumerist and ecological agenda.²⁴ The poster first appeared, together with the #OCCUPYWALLSTREET twitter hashtag, on July 13, 2011,²⁵ almost two months before the first tents were raised 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. A 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.²⁶ 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?

Despite the strength and rage that 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 typically located, 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 1830 *Liberty Leading the People*. 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. The objects and gestures featured in both images clearly belong to the universal language of revolution. There are, however, two important differences between these pictures. 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,



Occupy Wall Street poster by Adbusters



Liberty Leading the People by Eugène Delacroix (1830)

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 *Adbusters'* 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?

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"²⁷ dressed like a disheveled Greek goddess – is in her element on the barricades of Paris. Both allegories are urban and, as such, 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. They represent what Hannah Arendt argues lies at the heart of modern age revolutions, that is "the idea that freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide."²⁸

The OWS ballerina now belongs 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, however, she is not part of the "masquerade of equality:"²⁹ 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 duly acknowledged. 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*, Paul Mason enthusiastically announces that "the 'archetypal' protest leader, organizer, facilitator, spokesperson now is an educated young woman."³⁰ 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 Arab Spring – as Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi note,³¹ the narratives accompanying reports on the 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.³²

Regardless of women's actual involvement in past and current revolutionary situations, it is important to keep in mind that not all images of revolution reflect revolutionary realities – except, perhaps, for the pictures that possess documentary value, like the image of the "woman in a blue bra" in Cairo.

Women As Embodiments of Revolution's Failure

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:³³ the market women marching on Versailles in 1789; female 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; Asmaa Mahfouz encouraging people via her vlog to join her on Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, to mention only a few. Just as often, women end up among the first victims of the post-revolutionary order. Gutwirth, Godineau, Moghadam, and others have written at length about how, over and over again, in France, Mexico, Algeria, Nicaragua, and 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. 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.³⁴ Yet even the so-called modernizing revolutions, like the October Revolution³⁵ or the Nicaraguan Revolution,³⁶ after initial improvements for hitherto suppressed groups, including

women, eventually led to serious repercussions for the latter. Post-revolutionary suppression of women and violence against them are a well-documented and much-theorized phenomenon.³⁷ Long ago the French revolutionary Olympe de Gouge famously lamented: "O my poor sex! O women who have gained nothing from the Revolution!"³⁸ Her cry echoes in Cairo today.

The image of the "woman in a blue bra" represents the failure of the new beginning Arendt talks about; it represents the failure of revolution – particularly when we juxtapose it with photographs of Egyptian women occupying (together with men) Tahrir Square in January 2011, women celebrating the end of the oppressive Mubarak regime in February 2011, and women announcing the victory of the Arab Spring from the covers of international opinion magazines. Recorded in



A still from the amateur video depicting the "woman in a blue bra" (source)

Tahrir in December 2011, an amateur video depicts one of countless instances 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 armed police officers. 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 that 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 out of the frame. Police batons and heavy boots land indiscriminately and with full force on various parts of the young bodies. After receiving several blows to 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."³⁹ My concern with Mitchell's interpretation is that it overlooks the fact that the woman's part "in the tableau of active nonviolence"⁴⁰ may not be a calculated decision on her part: she appears to be unconscious and may simply not be able to fight back. The woman is immobilized by violence, so much is clear. Whether she is making a statement against violence is debatable.

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 horridly resembled the act of shrouding. What it also calls to mind are myriad images of sexual violence inflicted on women in conflict situations, particularly war rape. Although in the scene depicted in the video the woman is "only" partially disrobed and beaten – rather than raped and murdered – we know all too well that the language of power executed, in this case by the Egyptian military police, can manifest itself in much more bestial ways. 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."⁴¹ Owing to its nearly immediate symbolic significance, the attack on the "girl in the blue bra" remains one of the most widely discussed instances of post-revolutionary violence against women in Egypt and a reminder of other cases of brutality such as severe beatings, "virginity tests," and torture. The day after the assault, thousands of women – and men – took to the streets of Cairo protesting against police violence. They marched holding printouts of a single frame from the YouTube video showing the partly unrobed woman being beaten by the police. The "blue bra girl,"⁴² as the media labeled the anonymous victim, instantly became a symbol of the failed Egyptian uprising.

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 climatic 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 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."⁴³ 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



A mural in Cairo depicting the military police assault on the "blue bra girl" (source)

as a stencil, sometimes accompanied by a footprint that reads: "long live a peaceful revolution."⁴⁴ Reproduced countless times, it has not only engraved itself on the minds of the people who walk the streets of Egypt's capital, it also became recognizable 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,"⁴⁵ often in the form of graffiti and murals painted on the walls and cement blocks across the city, most prominently on Mohamed Mahmoud Street⁴⁶ and Tahrir Square. One of the said pieces authored by the graffiti artist El Teneen depicts a charging Supergirl 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 that earned the YouTube video so much attention in the first place, we may 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.

Color is equally important in 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 cameraman in the blue plaid shirt who

appears in the fourth image. The red-clad woman instantly became one of the most prominent icons of the Gezi Park protests. She received a tacky nickname (Lady in Red) and inspired various street art pieces, internet cartoons, and posters. Would the photo have become so popular had the protester 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 fresco, "The Uprising."⁴⁷ That's red – but why blue?

The bright blue color emphasizes the woman protester's individuality in the face of the disproportionate and uniform state power. She speaks the language of revolution, a civic language that encourages expressions of individual uniqueness and human togetherness. The military police speak the language of power: uniform and predictable. Azoulay notes that the language of revolution and the language of power have "a totally different syntax"⁴⁸ – they may also have totally different color palettes.



Gezi Park protests (source)

The colorful garments that single out the individual from the crowd in the Cairo and Istanbul scenes are feminine pieces of clothing. Both images thus emphasize the protesters' femininity. Both present women as victims of state power. One could also argue that both images present women as powerless and equate femininity with weakness. Or, as Mitchell proposes, they reveal feminine connotations of nonviolence. None of the above interpretations, however, offer a satisfactory explanation of these images' immediate iconic quality and their tremendous resonance. In keeping with my reading of the role of women in recent revolutionary iconography, these particular pictures have become important because of a certain implicit duality they entail. Each of these women, dressed in exactly the same clothes, could have represented freedom and a new beginning. The female protester in Cairo, if photographed in February 2011, might have been hailed as a symbol of hope for a new Egypt. With her summer dress, loose hair, and a tote bag, the protester in Istanbul doesn't look much different from the urban girls on Occupy posters – free and *demanding* a new beginning.⁴⁹ Femininity in revolutionary iconography is not inherently violent or nonviolent, it's not inherently strong or weak – it is characterized by the potentiality of meanings opposite to

those it appears to convey at a given time.

Conclusion: The Language of Revolution Today

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 spaces" Mitchell encourages us to focus on. 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, are now as much part of the universal language of revolution as the Molotov cocktail and the barricade.

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 imaginary, 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 "blue bra girl" is, in Mitchell's words, "all too actual, real, and bodily,"⁵⁰ clubbed to the ground and beaten into unconsciousness. Her embodied suffering enraged thousands of Egyptians. She became inspirational not because of a cleverly developed 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. It is a reminder not so much of protesters' nonviolence embodied by women, but, rather, a reminder of state violence inflicted on women.

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 wears 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) [\(source\)](#)

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 speaks 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.⁵¹ The resurfacing of the ballerina image in various cultural and political contexts – most recently on Kiev's Maidan⁵² – demonstrates that 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.⁵³

The universal language of revolution 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 revolutionary images centered on women. Mitchell attributes this phenomenon to the largely nonviolent character of the 2011 protests: because of feminine connotations of nonviolence, he argues, both positive and negative images of

revolution focus centrally on women. Another way of looking at it is to see the current trend as a return to the 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 of both revolution's highest aspirations and its lowest failures. The woman as a symbol of freedom and a new beginning transcends earthly limitations, inspires crowds, 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, 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, key role – in recent protests movements, as part of the visual language of revolution spoken across the globe.

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Footnotes

1 See: Paul Mason, *Why It's Still Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (New York: Verso, 2013).

2 Ariella Azoulay, "The Language of Revolution – Tidings from the East," in *Critical Inquiry* Web Exclusive: The New Arab Spring 8 August 2011, 1-5, http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/the_language_of_revolution_azoulay/, accessed May 4, 2014.

3 Zuccotti Park is a remarkable and telling exception: with its status of a "private-public partnership" (a globally widespread form of the 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.

4 W.J.T. Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," *Critical Inquiry* 39.1 (2012): 9.

5 Ibid., original emphasis.

6 See, e.g., Marina A. Sitrin, *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

7 Mitchell, "Image," 8.

8 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 (i.e., the anti- or counter-monument). 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).

9 Mitchell, "Image," 15.

10 Ariella Azoulay, "Revolution," *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* 2012, <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/revolution-ariella-azoulay/>, accessed May 4, 2014; original emphasis.

11 This has been wonderfully accomplished by Lisa Robertson and Matthew Stadler in their edited volume *Revolution: A Reader* (Portland: Publication Studio, 2012).

12 Ibid.

13 See, e.g., Ariella Azoulay, "Revolution Is A Language," a lecture at the House of People, summer 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKviAvT_5iQ, accessed May 4, 2014.

14 Susan Buck-Morss, "Globalization, Cosmopolitanism, Politics, and the Citizen,"

Journal of Visual Culture 1.3 (2002): 339.

15 Eric Hobsbawm, "Man and Woman in Socialist Iconography," *History Workshop* 6 (1978): 124.

16 Ibid.

17 Mitchell, "Image," 16.

18 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, and Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 143.

19 Dominique Godineau, "Daughters of Liberty and Revolutionary Citizens," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in *A History of Women in the West, Vol. 4. Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*, edited by Geneviève Fraisse, Michelle Perrot (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 15-32. Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992). Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolutions (1789-1820)*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983).

20 Maria Janion, *Kobiety i duch inności* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2006), 31.

21 Qtd. in Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992), 326.

22 Nadezda Petrusenko, "Women in the World of Gender Stereotypes: The Case of the Russian Female Terrorists at the Beginning of the 20th Century," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1.4 (2011): 136.

23 Brigitte L. Nacos, "The Portrayal of Female Terrorists In the Media: Similar Framing Patterns in the News Coverage of Women In Politics and In Terrorism" in *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization*, ed. Cindy D. Ness (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 221.

24 For a detailed description of Adbusters' activities see their homepage: www.adbusters.org accessed May 4, 2014.

25 William Yardley, "The Branding of the Occupy Movement," *The New York Times* November 28 2011: B1.

26 The statue conceived and produced by the artist Arturo Dimodica as "a symbol of virility and courage" has 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>, accessed May 4, 2014.

27 Hobsbawm, "Man and Woman," 122.

28 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 29.

29 Joan B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001), 132. The French Revolution had a woman for its symbol, but did not offer women any substantial rights – they were declared "passive citizens" and thus had 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. As Landes argues, 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.

30 Mason, *Why It's Still*, 272.

31 Lila Abu-Lughod and Rabab El-Mahdi, "Beyond the 'Woman Situation' in the Egyptian Revolution," *Feminist Studies* 37.3 (2011): 684.

32 Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 189.

33 Godineau, "Daughters of Liberty," 16.

34 Valentine Moghadam, "Gender and Revolutions" in *Theorizing Revolutions*, ed. John Foran (London: Routledge, 1997), 137.

35 See, e.g., Françoise Navailh, "The Soviet Model," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in *A History of Women in the West, Vol. 5. Towards a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Françoise Thébaud (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

36 See Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El*

Salvador, Chiapas (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2004).

37 See, e.g., Valentine Moghadam, "Is the Future of Revolution Feminist? Rewriting 'Gender and Revolutions' for a Globalizing World" in *The Future of Revolutions: Rethinking Radical Change in the Age of Globalization*, ed. John Foran (London: Zed Books, 2003).

38 Qtd. in Moghadam, "Gender and Revolutions," 144.

39 Mitchell, "Image," 16.

40 Ibid.

41 Dabashi, *The Arab Spring*, 186.

42 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).

43 Mikala Hyldig Dal, Cairo, *Images of Transition: Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt 2011-2013* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 233.

44 The blue bra stencil is authored by Bahia Shehab and part of her street art project "A Thousand Times No."

45 Mona Abaza, "Gender Representation in Graffiti Post-25 January," in Hyldig Dal, *Cairo*, 250.

46 A street in central Cairo, close to Tahrir Square, a 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, an urban art project initiated in early 2012 by the Revolutionary Artists' Union. As Mohamed Elshahed notes, "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" ("Tahrir Square: Social Media, Public Space" in Hyldig Dal, *Cairo*, 24).

47 Diego Riviera, "The Uprising," 1931,

<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/rivera/content/mural/uprising/detail.php>
accessed May 4, 2014.

48 Azoulay, "The Language of Revolution," 3.

49 See, e.g., http://cdn2.openculture.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/01_Drooker.jpg, accessed May 4, 2014.

50 Mitchell, "Image," 16.

51 See the blog entry "Street Art on Mohamed Mahmoud – Photos":

<http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2012/03/25/street-art-on-mohamed-mahmoud-photos/>, accessed 4 May 2014. As Julia Tulke, the scholar running <http://aestheticsofcrisis.org/>, helped me figure out, the original photograph that inspired the mural was taken by Dimitar Dilko in 2008:http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2008/12/2008_greek_riots.html#photo33, accessed May 4, 2014.

52 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>, accessed May 4, 2014.

53 Azoulay, "The Language of Revolution," 2.