A Semiotic Analysis of an Activist Image in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is evaluating how meaning is created through still images on an activist poster sample and how deeper meanings and ideologies are reached from surface meaning units in relation to the visual culture, eye-centered social structure and visual semiotics hypothesis. Posters can be seen in contemporary new media and they make use of signs. They influence the periods they are in by affecting the decision and behavior mechanisms of the society as they are inspired by realities of life. With the help technological advancements, they have become livelier, more dynamic, striking and appealing. In new media sites the audience has developed out of being a passive recipient into an active subject, personalizing mass communication in fragments. This transformation in mass communication due to new computer-based communication technologies reshapes the information society. Time and place have disappeared; in this new social relationship visual relationship forms have an increasing role.

Keywords: Semiotic; Social media images; Visual meaning; Visual communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The images that we have been exposed to lately draw a lot of attention beyond the truths that they represent and bring the things that we want or do not want to see into light in a powerful and effective way. Individuals are now supposed to grasp, understand and analyze images faster. The visual settings are gaining more importance, and as their importance is growing so is the effect of the guidance that they create on social processes. Because of this reason Mirzoeff (1998), regards the century that we are in as an era in which "eye-centered" societies are being formed. Meaning is formed through the interaction between the receiver and the message. Thus, the components that constitute the image, the relationship among these components, the myths, ideologies and the connotations they include are effective on the process of forming a conscience as a result of interpretation. The hidden meanings behind the obvious meaning can be

revealed by advanced analysis methods. One can reach meaning and ideology by analyzing visuals that are intended to communicate via visual semiotics with a structuralist approach.

The images that are perceived through sense organs are related with psychological interpretation on the individual level and with cultural interpretation on the social level. According to Berger (1978), the way we think or believe affects the way we see things. Visuals with a demonstration and protest content provide the powerful meanings of mass mobilization to be seen. Images, inherently, create a general language, which has an intense protest message, brings out emotions and might be shocking.

Recently, the protests in social media and the production of such images cascade as a result of the spread of new communication technologies and the dramatic increase in visual media. Particularly digital cameras, camera phones, computers and Internet usage provide unforeseen opportunities. The cameras of the activists or the images they produce, too, make up an important part of demonstrations or protests.

This study is a semiotic analysis. The first thing that semiotics question is not what the meaning is but rather how it is created. This study evaluates how meaning is created through still images on an activist image sample and how deeper meanings and ideologies are reached from surface meaning units in relation to the visual culture, eye-centered social structure and visual semiotics hypothesis.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Culture includes recognition, information, emotion, judgment, opinion and actions that regulate the economic system as regards to the political system. In this conceptualization, culture is a symbolic organization that nurtures, regulates and reproduces social relation, values and priorities. Visuals that are produced as part of protests are such reflections of culture. Being an element of culture, poster designs, just like other elements of culture, interact with the public. This is a two-way interaction; as social processes affect the production of posters, posters affect social change. Visual culture, despite its 'passive' nature, has eminently 'active' qualities. It defends opinions and legitimizes them. Sometimes it opposes, resists and creates new radical ideas. Thus, visual culture ensures the transformation of society by having an impact on educational, political, sociological and economic processes.

The analysis of every image that appears on our mind and that can be identified as an object, event or dream is within the scope of semiotics. Signs become the subject of

semiotics as long as they carry a meaning for people or a certain group (Günay, 2012:22). The basic scope of semiotics is meaning, the creation of meaning and signification. The signification phenomena of extra-linguistic signs such as posters are different than linguistic signs and they are examined as a whole (Günay ve Parsa 2012:25). The truth is conveyed directly in visual signs. Visuality is one of the easiest perception ways; we learn % 83 of what we learn through seeing (Sönmez, 2005:122).

Images are products of human consciousness (Leppert, 2002). The human mind is somehow influenced by these images. Boundless visuality, which dominates communication tools, has a broad and influential power. According to Gramsci, mass media are tools (ideological hegemony) that the ruling elite uses to preserve their wealth, power and status (ethical, philosophical, cultural, etc.) (Aytaç, 2004). English cultural researchers extend his theory and approach it as a total enclosure of social and cultural life. In English cultural studies, there is an effort to institutionalize the emerging movements by bringing an inclusive look on the definition of culture and without excluding the groups that constitute society. Hence, popular culture, which the culture industry underestimates, takes center stage. According to Stuart Hall, culture is an arena of alliance (consent) or resistance. Even partly, it is the place where hegemony appears and is guaranteed (Storey, 2000:10). In other words, culture is a natural social reaction that develops in the prevailing culture within the hegemony and anti hegemony concept. In contrast to what Adorno claims, society is not a passive but an 'active consumer' against productive powers. As Fiske states popular powers transform cultural goods into cultural resources, they multiply the meanings and pleasures that it presents, they resist it by eluding from its efforts to discipline, they shatter its uniformity and harmony, they attack it abruptly and they poach there (Fiske, 1999:41). Popular culture provides the improvement of visual literacy techniques and is the top factor that recreates them. Kellner states that culture is intrinsically communicative by identifying culture with media culture. Culture originates in a social setting and thus while it is a tool for communication it is also is a tool of communication (Kellner, 2009). Therefore, the images and visuals should be examined by considering media culture theories. Industrialized media and the media culture theory that analyze mediatized popular phenomena include visual culture.

When visual design is defined as the process of visualizing a line or level of thought, it has to transform into a presentation or promotion where the only understanding or remembering value is a poster, image or words. Political posters are social posters and they guide society. Anti-political posters criticize the attitudes, behaviors and actions of the states, governments, statesmen and politicians and these posters maintain a stance against them. Political posters have periodically affected the decision-making and

behavior patterns of society and have influenced these processes. Users gained the opportunity to obtain many images that they want as a result of the advancements in computer technology.

Post-modern approaches that center on the individual, along with technological advancements of post-1970, gave personal choices a prominence (Becer, 2005:111). With modernism, rationalistic communication and design principles were pushed aside. With post-modernism, posters have become livelier, more dynamic, fancier and more appealing in accordance with the spirit of the times. The audience has turned into an active subject from a passive receiver and this has given way to fragmentation and individualization in mass communication (Castells, 2005:42). This change in mass communication is met with computer-based communication technologies that helped information society reform. With the spread of the use of these technologies, it is obvious that the activities on traditional channels continue to exist by bringing their presence on the Internet together. In this framework, it is inevitable to think that web-based applications that gained speed with social networks have caused the birth of a new way of communication that defies time and space. The Internet is a social setting on top of being a communication tool. This setting is a mediator in creating new forms of social relationship. (Poster, quoted by Timissi, 2003:147).

Social networks are known to enable people to communicate and build fellowship in certain virtual communities without bringing them face-to-face. According to Reinghold, modern world is too complicated and fragmented for individuals to form close communities. People have such a strong desire to get together and belong that new social sites are unavoidable to be formed. (Reinghold, quoted by Timissi, 2003:162). Social networks create a space where individuals willingly relay and share their identities, private lives and certain preferences. Besides the identities that are formed, social networks also give individuals the opportunity to be a part of groups that they like and get together with other people on matters that they are interested in. This situation paves the way for socialization through technology and "belonging to a virtual community has an emotional and selective importance (Tajfel, quoted by Ebren from 1978, 2009:63).

In Turkey Gezi Park protests started as an action to prevent the reconstruction of the Military Barracks at Taksim Gezi Park without a reconstruction permit. The posters that appeared on social media during Gezi Park protests are like those posters that turned into a tool of communication with the spirit of political action and collective consciousness, which spread all around the world in the 1960s. These posters and

images are products of popular culture. They became a tool for political and philosophical thoughts and ideals, transforming into an important communication tool in the reinforcement of a way of thinking through design (Öztuna, 2007:80). During the era of a lot of street protests, many posters were created and shared on virtual platforms. These posters that fall into the category of political posters are mostly used for warning the public politically, set them in motion and invite them to action. The circumstances that determine the visuality of these posters are different. Functionality is ahead of aesthetic concerns because these posters are used in spontaneous social protests. With the use of humor, which can be utilized with its social function, criticism, which is the main purpose of humor, is also taken advantage of.

3. METHODOLOGY

Signs are the representation of objects in nature. There are various approaches to analyze signs. The methods created and used in analysis studies have been criticized throughout history. For example; David Lodge identifies 14 different analytical approaches in his book "Small World: An Academic Romance (1984): rhetorical, archetypal, biographical, existentialist, Freudian, Christian, historical, Jungian, Marxist, mythical, phenomenological and structural. Although most analyses do not require so many approaches, some sort of critical method to analyze pictures to fully appreciate visual communication must be used. Any type of analysis is always a journey of personal investigation (Lester, 2014:128, quoted by Lodge, 1984). Recently, particularly in the second half of the 20th century, critics and educators such as Rudolf Arnheim, John Berger, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and others took image production and visual communicators seriously. Consequently, visual literacy gradually developed into a serious study. For Berger, an image must be analyzed within its presentational context (Berger, 1978). A newspaper front page, a quick-click photograph viewed on a phone or images on social media, etc. – all create unique contexts of meaning and, thus, of analysis. As varied as the contexts are for images, so too should be the varied ways in which images are analyzed.

Rose suggests visual images must be reviewed critically in the framework of visual methodology and to decode meaning we need three sites. These are: the site of production, the site of the image, and the site of the audiences. Furthermore, at each of these complicated and various interpretive sites, Rose envisioned three modalities concurrently contributing at various levels to understanding visuals: the technological modality, the compositional modality, and the social modality (Rose, 2001:16). Despite being time-consuming, analytical approaches are valuable because they help to distinguish and edit subtle details, leading to universal reality. Understanding/perception

must be the purpose in any type of visual analysis, with or without personal, occupational or cultural reasons. This approach requires a resemblance between the creation of visual - as much as the cultural details and personal experiences of the artist permit- and his/her biography. Analysis should come after a detailed review of the work. In this research, such kind of an analytical method is followed. To understand the image Perlmutter's ways and Lester's analysis method (Lester, 2014:129) is followed.

A purposive sampling, one of the Gezi Park protest posters, taken from different practices of activism images circulating in social media sets the empirical focus of this research (Şimşek and Yıldırım, 2004). This poster was shared on social media on 6 June 2013 to support Gezi Park and can be downloaded for free (Fig.1). Gezi Park protests in Turkey involved protests against government's prohibitions, the lifestyle and beliefs that are imposed, and police brutality. At the time of the protests a great number of posters were created and circulated on social media. Therefore, purposive sampling is taken from Gezi posters-visuals (Şimşek and Yıldırım, 2004). This visual, which is believed to have comprehensive information, started to circulate on Twitter and Facebook from the very beginning of the protests, and many users even made it their profile pictures. Tweeting rate reached its peak, about 100.000, in June 2013 in Turkey and it indicated an important social situation.

Fig. 1. The research sampling[*].

4. FINDINGS /RESULTS

The objects of the visual: The woman is on the forefront; her body slightly leaned on her right, her hair falling down on her left and right shoulders. Her hair is parted and her left ear is visible. She has her arms in the air, her hands, and palms open and turned towards the sky. Her right leg is before the left one on the ground, the left leg is in the background. Her dress is whitish, just like the ground, but it also has beige stains. Upper

right leg is seen through the slit and it is longer than the other leg. Her face and arms are white and her eyes, nose and mouth are vague. The tree is in the background and perceived to become a whole with the woman's body. The green leafs of the tree unite with her hair, making a big circle. Consequently, green branches are perceived as very big, fuzzy hair. Two legs on the front are brown, forming the stem of the tree as well. The green leafed part of the tree, or the woman's hair, takes up two third of the visual. In the remaining one third, we can see the legs, "Resist Gezi Park" caption and under that "Gezi Park Occupy Gezi". The green and brown captions have computer icons called "square" before them.

Composition: The hair, or the leafed part of the tree, grabs immediate attention due to its size and round shape. The big round shape formed by tree leaves leads the gaze into the woman's face, which is at the center. Going down, one sees the slit dress, legs, feet and captions. The woman is also perceived as a hidden figure in the tree.

Visual clues: The round shape and arms opening up sideways have a kinetic structure as they include diagonal lines. One leg before the other gives a sense of depth. The big green circle is so big that it reaches the woman's knees, which conflicts with reality. Green is the dominant colour. Although the eyes are vague, judging from the face heading upwards, we feel she is looking at the sky. The poster is in a vertical rectangular shape. On the ground there are off-white lines and stains.

Gestalt principles: Similarity: The leafed part of the tree looks similar to the woman's hair, and her legs look similar to the tree's stem. *Proximity*: The leaves placed together form a circle and tend to be perceived as the branches and leaves of the tree. *Continuation*: Stimuli following a certain path reach both woman figure and the tree figure unity. *Closure*: Although the woman image is incomplete, enough is present for the eye to complete the shape. *Figure and ground*: According to selective perception theory the object or shape that attention focuses on changes, figure and ground relationships change upon perceiving the tree or the woman.

Semiotic signs: Visual signs: woman, tree, dress, green. Iconic signs: The posture of the woman, arms stretching sideways and taking a step forward. Symbols: Arms, along with hands, symbolize the power to do, apply, and perform in many traditions (Salt, 2010:212). Hands indicate a request. In all religions, hands go up to appeal. The palms opening up to the sky is a language of request. It symbolizes prayer (Reca, 2010:47). In Turkish, arms stretching sideways means welcoming wholeheartedly, getting ready to embrace, showing love and friendship. Second meaning is related to protecting and

placing a claim on a place. Tree is a very common symbol seen in many traditions. It is the symbol of uniting tree places with its roots under the ground, stem on the ground and leaves reaching the sky. The meaning that this link encompasses is quite broad: For instance; elevation of a body or a bodiless entity to a spiritual 'plan', or creating a link between the heavens and the earth. Tree is a symbol of "rising" as it grows upward. It is the symbol of spread and nourishment similar to nervous system and veins. It is the symbol of revival and immortality as it sheds leaves and then becomes green again. Particularly beech is the symbol of life in Turkish societies such as Ural, Altaic people. In Asian shamanist Turkish traditions the creation of human species is associated with this tree (Salt, 2010:351). Green: Green is the dominant colour in plants, and it is also used as a reassuring symbol in some societies. Brown: It is the colour of reality, plan and system. It increases your pace. It is not preferred for clothes because the person wearing brown does not stand out in the crowd. It is a neutralizer (milliyet.com.15.05.2014). Clothing: A cultural element. Humans attach it to nature. It distinguishes the person's social class, profession, environment, seasons, period, feelings and thoughts. Smartness is a social acceptance field. The slit dress in the sampling symbolizes a modern social group status. There are no shoes. Hairstyles indicate moods for women. Long wavy and parted hairstyle is regarded as "cool personality" (Reca, 2010:68). The woman is taking a step forward; this adds dimension and movement to the image.

Semiotic codes: Metonymy: The tree is related to deforestation. Analogy: Hair resembles to branches and leaves. The stem and the woman's legs bear a similarity.

Cognitive elements: The pattern in memory created by the same information, references to woman or feminism as a gender symbol, a step forward can be associated with the woman's bravery and fearlessness. Resist gezi park is used with a "#" symbol. As an essential symbol of Twitter, this symbol is used to facilitate talking on a particular topic.

Aesthetic aspects of image: The image particularly takes attention to the woman at the center. Uniting the woman and tree signs, associating hair with tree is an indication of creativity. After these preliminary steps, we can continue the analysis with these six perspectives:

4.1. Six perspectives
Personal perspective: Gezi Park demonstrations first began against plans to uproot trees on Taksim Square. During the protests a number of women symbolized women's protecting nature at the forefront against police brutality (using pepper spray and water cannons).

Historical perspective: From a visual timeline perspective, starting from the very first hours of the events, this visual image was shared on social media and many Facebook users used it as their profile pictures. It became viral and created awareness. Turkey was going through an important time when the image was being produced and shared. The visuals and humor in Gezi Park demonstrations became an important element of resistance, leading to anger among rulers; and boosting morals and motivation among protesters. As a manifestation of discontent about their requests' being oppressed and ignored, people from all walks of life started circulating many visuals described as "creative mind".

Ministry of Internal Affairs informed on 23 June 2013 that 2.5 million people participated in the demonstrations held in 79 cities. This young population social movement started with an environmental problem. Protests gained momentum after 3-5 trees were uprooted; that "environmental rights" are fundamental rights was reminded with sounds and videos in an unprecedented way for Turkish history. Social media had a huge role for protesters to inform each other. On the night of 31 May, 2 million tweets were posted about the topic under 3 main hash tag groups in just 12 hours. Protesters opposing the demolition of Gezi Park were exposed to pepper gas; "the woman in the red dress" who was subjected to pepper gas and "the woman in black" standing in front of a Mass Incident Intervention Vehicle played important roles in turning national and international gaze to the protests and they became symbols (Fig. 2.). (http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2013/06/130624_siyahli_kadin.shtml)

Fig. 2. The photos, which are taken in front of the intervention vehicle, became symbolic icon as "woman in black"(because of her dress color) and it inspires the visuals on social media and printed materials.

Technical perspective: Social media are sites of sharing and interaction formed through means of communication and platforms that are highly accessible and scalable. Visual sharing is becoming more and more popular on these platforms. 300 million photographs are shared daily on Facebook (http://webunya.com/sosyal-medyada-gorsel-yonetimi-2). Web and mobile are updating themselves frequently to keep up with the pace. Users can

use stock photos, take photos of themselves or create graphics and illustrations. The first key to using an effective and successful visual at these sites is related to how often it is shared by others, and the second being the quality of the visual. Quality can be achieved through high definition. However, it should be noted that sharing is susceptible to exploitation. In social media, being snackable, scroll-stoppable, stickable, shareable and searchable are keys that enable visual content to be successful (http://sosyalmedyakulubu.com.tr/infografik-2/gorsel-icerigin-basariya-ulasabilme-kriterleri.html).

These media sites not only intensify mass interaction but they also have a demassification effect enabling large groups to send personal messages. These new communication technologies defy the obligation of simultaneity and let the individual send or receive messages at a convenient time (Geray, 2012:17). Consequently, new media provide an intensive interaction, personalized messaging and infinite motion independent of time to both personal and institutional users. The websites where we can see the posters of this study enable users to give personal information, communicate with friends, share photos and videos and organize events (Eldeniz, 2010:26). Social sharing networks differ in their interfaces, features and user groups. Based on their content, they can have written, visual, audial products, and videos. The most well known and active of these social networks is Facebook. It makes a product visible for the ideal consumer and effectively brings them together. Clearly, extensive adoption of social media tools produces rich textual data. Particularly with visuality coming to the center stage, visuals and messages gained an advantage in this environment.

Ethical perspective: Image production projects not harming humans in terms of moral and ethical responsibilities that the subject and viewer own and share, and active participation into sensitivity. Aesthetic and monetary satisfaction is out of question. Immanuel Kant suggests that if an action is done with the motive of profit or expectation, then it is without moral value. If, however, an action is done with the motive of duty, without any profits or expectations, obeying an unconditional command, then it has moral value. The intention of an action rather than committing the action is significant. This is also true for a person giving visual information.

Cultural perspective: Cultural analysis of a visual involves use of symbols and metaphors, and determining meanings as a whole. Symbolism and cultural perspective are closely related to semiotics. This study looks at analyzing symbols and metaphors used at a specific time to transfer to a specific society. Metaphors in the sampling are based on real world experiences. The visual is based on a real incident. It gives a message at a specific

time to a specific society. The symbolism in visual elements is about restoring peace, which is pioneered by woman identity.

Critical perspective: The culture where the image is produced has a perception that protects nature and identifies trees with human species. This study is a product of real experiences. Thus, image production benefits from real experiences. By nature, humans can be a part of many personal or social events. This feminist coded image symbolises women's existence at the forefront, their courage, love for trees and resistance against power during Gezi Park protests.

CONCLUSION

Images on posters, social media, televisions, billboards, mobiles, in cinemas, theatres, exhibitions, video games, websites, etc. have become an indispensable part of our contemporary lives. Visual culture that we live with and see everyday has become a routine and a natural part of our lives. Each of these images, big or small, coloured or black-and-white, moving or motionless, conveys an idea or a message, and communicates. The signs on these visual culture products are specially designed to have an effect on the viewer.

Women are symbolic carriers of community identity individually and collectively. Female figure in many cultures symbolizes the spirit of society, and it represents. This symbol is also used frequently in important social movements. In the sample image, the role of a strong and confident woman is in the foreground and in the following days of protests the mothers supported their children together with them.

Visual communication and visual culture are dominant in today's world. Understanding and explaining this world can be achieved through reading these images. Huxley argues, "the more you know, the more you see". The more you know, the more your eyes and brain will sense. The more you sense, the more your mind will select. The more you select, the more you will perceive what you are seeing. The more you perceive, the more you remember as the image become a part become a part of your long-term memory. The more you remember, the more you learn. The more you learn, the more you know. The more you know, the more you will sense; which starts the circle spinning around again. The circle of seeing and knowing is in constant motion. Those images become a part of your general knowledge of the world. You become a visual literate. This is the aim of visual literacy: to feel, select, but more importantly to sense.

Political posters can be seen in contemporary new media and they make use of signs. Posters influence the periods they are in by affecting the decision and behavior mechanisms of the society as they are inspired by realities of life. With the help technological advancements, they have become livelier, more dynamic, striking and appealing. As Castells suggests, in new media sites the audience has developed out of being a passive recipient into an active subject, personalizing mass communication in fragments. This transformation in mass communication due to new computer-based communication technologies reshapes the information society. In our real lives, informal public spaces are replaced by new sites, as a result of the motivation of people or societies from all around the world to create new sites. Time and place have disappeared; in this new social relationship visual relationship forms have an increasing role.

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