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Awad, Sarah H.

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## **The Social Life of Images**

### **Sarah Awad**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a theoretical and methodological approach to analyzing images in public space as part of a transformative visual dialogue in everyday life. Images are conceptualized through the lens of sociocultural psychology and analytically approached through the metaphor of ‘the social life of images,’ by which the life cycle of images are followed as they respond and borrow from one another in a continuous dialogue. The analytical framework starts by situating the image and identifying its spatial and temporal contexts. Then it considers the social actors influencing the image’s social life and the different stages in an image’s trajectory. Leading to an analysis of the political dynamics of an image and its potential symbolic power to influence the public discourse. Examples from street art, online, and news images will be used to illustrate the analytical approach.

### **Keywords:**

Images; Visual culture; psychology

Our everyday lives are saturated with images. Together with language, images constitute our stock of social knowledge and meaning making processes. We form perceptions about different groups and concepts through visual images. We get a sense of place and emotionally relate to certain spaces through images. In an increasingly visual late modern society, our visual culture thus mediates how we affectively inhabit our environment and how our environment inhabits us.

How can we then understand the dynamics of those images circulating in everyday public life, especially when those images deviate away from the traditional dyadic of a producer/artist and a perceiver? With modern technologies, the visual image has become less of a static object produced and controlled by a sole author, but rather a transformative tool in the hands of millions of producers and perceivers. There are more ways to perceive and interact with images; audience can take an image from the news or the urban space, reproduce it onto online media, or edit it to affirm or contradict its meaning, or report it to censorship to limit its circulation. These new dynamics facilitated how images could be used as tools in public debates and enabled perceivers of an image to be also re-producers and in times censors of that same image. This opens up new ways of debating topics in the public space and new ways to methodologically analyse those visual dialogues.

I present in this article one approach to analyse the transformations of images in everyday life contexts and thus exploring what kind of dynamics and influence they could have on public discourse. I use examples from different graffiti, street art, posters, and news and

online images in different public spaces such as urban space and online media. For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on graphic images (i.e. pictures and designs) as opposed to other forms of images as per Mitchell's (1984; 1986) conceptual distinctions between graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, and verbal images. Those graphic images will be conceptualized through the lens of sociocultural psychology.

Sociocultural psychology studies the interrelation between individuals and their environment, looking at how signs and tools surrounding us mediate our psychological higher mental functioning, our actions, and development through our life course (Cole, 1996; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007; Valsiner, 2014). From one hand those signs and tools mediate our relation to the world and to others (Vygotsky, 1997), while on the other hand we continuously modify and transform them for our goal-oriented actions (Cole, 1996). Looking at images as part of this sign mediation and creation process helps explain how individuals use images to symbolically act on the world, others, and themselves and how images surrounding us shape our mind, emotions and memories.

To further this approach to images as transformative signs and tools of action taking part in everyday social dialogues and negotiations, I will first elaborate on the metaphor of 'the social life of images,' then follow this social life through an analytical framework that begins with **(1)** situating the image and exploring its spatial and temporal context, then **(2)** identifying the social actors involved with the image, and **(3)** the different stages in the image's social life, and finally **(4)** analysing the political dynamics of the image in

the public space and exploring its potential symbolic power to influence the public discourse.

### **The Social life of images**

The social life of an image approach builds on a conception of images as constructed and transformative representations of our ideas, our relationships, and ourselves. They are tools that travel, transform, and constantly change meaning and shape over space and time. Ascribing a social life to images does not assume that they are actors in themselves; but rather emphasizes the dynamic process images go through in response to different social actors and dialogues in the public discourse and in interaction with other images in the public space.

The idea of images having a social life borrows from Bakhtin's social life of discourse that moves us away from the idea of a 'private craftsmanship' of the artist or producer of the image (Bakhtin, 1992, p. 269). It also borrows from Benjamin's (1936/2008) ideas of the reproduction and 'afterlife' of artwork, where even in perfect replication of an image through mechanical reproduction it takes on a new 'presence' and 'unique existence' in time and space as the new production is 'reactivated' with every new perceiver. It also further draws inspiration from *The Social life of things*, which highlights the importance of understanding the social life of commodities and material artefacts in order to understand culture and person-object relations (Appadurai, 1986).

Bakhtin's dialogic theory explains how 'every utterance must be regarded as primarily a response to preceding utterances' (Bakhtin, 1989, p.91). Every new production affirms, supplements, or refutes previous productions, and its meaning relies on those previous productions and presupposes knowledge of them to be understood. Thus, every act of speech or creative work such as an image is a co-production with varying degrees of 'otherness' and 'our-own-ness' (Bakhtin, 1989, p.89). It becomes one's own only when he/she appropriates it and adapts it to one's own intentions.

Even though Bakhtin's theory primarily deals with language, it could be further applied to images (Wagoner, Awad, & Brescó, 2018). The dialogic conceptualization of an image liberates it from a sole owner that has a unilateral meaning for it and emphasizes its continuous life of (re)production and (re)interpretation. Any image no matter how original carries a history, it borrows from previous symbols and images, and the new meaning it constructs is dependent on how it affirms, supplements, or refutes the previously constructed meaning. The image then further accumulates different meanings in its social life, as it is used, copied, altered, and destroyed, opening up infinite possibilities for different voices and dialogues in the public space.

It is therefore essential to analyse the different moments in the cycle of their production, circulation, and consumption. It is in these moments that meanings accumulate and transform, and thus their analysis cannot be complete without understanding the contexts and social processes within which they become meaningful (Lister & Wells, 2000). This

understanding of images informs the elements of analysis to follow, beginning with situating images within their spatial and temporal contexts.

## **1. Situating Images**

Images cannot be understood in isolation of place and time; their meaning and power come within certain temporal social, cultural, historical, and political dynamics (Awad & Wagoner, 2018). Their meanings are also produced through where those images are placed in contiguity with other images, objects, and signs in the material world (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Situating images within their *context*, *place*, and *space* informs us about ways through which we inhabit and constantly remake our visual culture (Rogoff, 1998) and how images can reconstruct discourse in the public sphere (Bakhtin, 1992).

So to situate an image is to *first* identify its sociocultural, historical, and political context. This contextualization informs the dynamics of image production, perception, and social life. It also situates the topic of the image within the broader context. What topic is the image tackling or –especially in political images- what argument or contentious issue is it responding to explicitly or implicitly? Also what genre does this image belong to? *Second*, situating an image would also require identifying the medium where the image is placed and its material form. The medium could be a city wall, news media, or online media. The materiality of the image could tell of the tools of its production and placement, for example an illegal sprayed image on an underground wall, or a painted commissioned mural on a government building, or an advertisement billboard image. Of

importance here to the social life of those images, is how they travel from one medium to another, while changing their material form in the process, for example, a news photo of a refugee transformed into a painted mural on a wall in an urban setting. *Third*, the image needs to be seen within the broader space it occupies. Beyond the materiality of images and where they are placed, images also form part of the discourse of the public sphere as they travel between urban space, news, and online media. The key aspect in situating an image within the public discourse is in identifying the selection criteria of what image or images a research is looking at. For example, one could follow an image as it transforms from one medium to another taking up different arguments and voices, or one could focus on one contentious issue in one urban space for and look at the different images responding to each other in that medium with regards to that one topic.

Situating the image within the broader discourse is essential to see how images -along side verbal discourse- form the inter-subjective deliberative political dialogue in the public sphere (Doerr, 2017). The public sphere is a realm of social life where public opinion is formed, a sphere that mediates between society and state (Habermas, 1974). Habermas concept of public sphere is of use here to describe the public space where images, opinions, and discourses circulate, and public opinion is formed and negotiated. However, the dialogue in this sphere is far from Habermas's liberal model of reasoned, rational, and consensus-oriented dialogue where information is accessible to the public and the public freely express and publish different opinions. But rather follows Ranciere's (2004) conception of a contentious dialogue with unequal power dynamics, a dialogue where the less powerful is not recognized or visible in the public political stage.



When we look at urban images in the form of graffiti and government political billboards, as well as social media images of news photos, memes, and comics about matters of general interest and debate, we see that those mediums do not provide equal spaces for freedom of expression nor are there equal power dynamics between the different social actors producing the images. To illustrate this and further elements of the analytical framework, I will use an example from my fieldwork in relation to urban images produced in response to the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and their transformation over the six years following the revolution. Here we talk of a pre-revolution political context of control over the urban space and the visual culture, this control was interrupted by the revolution that also produced visual production that interrupted a monopolized visual monopoly. This could be seen in the street art and graffiti production of the revolution symbolically destructing the image of the authority and replacing it by that of protestors. Figure 1 is an example of a street art representing women protestors using the historical symbol of Nefertiti, a powerful queen from Ancient Egypt, wearing a gas mask, a contemporary symbol of protest.



Figure 1 Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Downtown Cairo, 2011.

Photo Credit: El Zeft

To analyse the Nefertiti image is to first situate it within its Egyptian sociocultural and political context and look at it within the genre of the revolution's visual production and the broader global subculture of resistance graffiti and street art. It is also to look at the meaning in its placement. The Nefertiti images was produced by activist and graffiti painter El Zeft and placed in 2011 in a very specific urban place; Mohamed Mahmoud street in Tahrir Square in Cairo. This street holds a unique meaning to the revolution activists: it is one of the first areas proclaimed by protestors in 2011 and became the birthplace of the revolutionary street art. It is also the street that witnessed many of the clashes between protestors and the police, and it therefore became a place of commemoration for the lost lives of the revolution. And finally the image flows within a space of a very contested political dialogue that extended throughout the years that followed as will be discussed further below. So to situate the image within that public space is to look at other images that respond and dialogue with it tackling the same contentious topic of the representation of the revolution as in other activists' images and government's counter-images.

## 2. Social Actors of images

To see images as situated social actions is to also identify the social actors involved with it. A social act is an action that cannot be completed by a single person in isolation, but requires interaction from other actors (Mead, 1934). Once a social actor produces an image in the public space, its social life becomes interdependent between the agency of its *producer*, *audience*, and *authority*.

*Image producers* could be any social actor who makes an image emerge in a certain time and space, she could be an artist creating a new image or an activist printing an older poster to put on a street wall, or a government launching a new campaign. *The audience* could be the general public seeing the image, for example the pedestrians in the street for a graffiti image. The social actor of 'audience' for an image is not limited to the targeted audience of the producer but could extend between urban space, news media, and online media. In modern communication an image is produced for an indefinite range of potential recipients (Thompson, 2005). While *the authority* could be any individuals or institutions playing the role of gatekeepers or censors to what images are allowed in a specific public space and time, this could be for example the government censoring an image, a pedestrian scratching an image off the wall, or an urban owner whitewashing an image from their building. The position of the social actors is not static but varies in the process of the image life. For example, a government campaign could be taking an older image and creatively destructing it by appropriating it into a new meaning and

reintroducing it into the city space; in this case the government takes the positions of the authority destructing an old image as well as the image producer of the modified one. The illustration in figure one is meant to highlight the interactive dialogue and the interdependence of the social life of the image on the triadic actors as they negotiate in the public space a specific contentious issue. This dialogue takes place through images as well as verbal discourses, it is also temporal, dynamic, and presupposes change of meanings rather than stability. It further shows the de-centralized symbolic power of images as it is distributed among the social actors and the different voices they present (Awad, Wagoner, & Glaveanu, 2017; Awad & Wagoner, 2018).

Looking back at the Nefertiti image in Figure 1, we see Activist El Zeft exercising agency within the protest movement through an intentional act of image production. In an interview with El Zeft in late 2014 he expresses his voice through that image: ‘... I wanted to recognize women as part of the revolution; their presence, the physical harassments they face, their marginalization... And putting this painting in Mohamed Mahmoud (street) which is in a way a very masculine street with all what happened in it of violence, it was a street of war (...) So putting her there is a reaffirmation of her presence and the big role women played in the revolution.’ Once El Zeft sprayed his stenciled image in the street it was received by audience in the street and in online media, some of which reproduced it in different forms as will be discussed below. The image also was met by authority censoring it by whitewashing it from the street alongside many other protest images.

### **3. Stages in images' social life**

What the different social actors do to an image shape the image's social life from *emergence, reception, diffusion, transformation, to destruction*. The image analysis presented in this framework focuses more on the changes along the image's social life along side other images in a dialogue. The analysis is based on analysing the image as a process of symbol creation and transformation rather than a static object. The symbols in the image are understood through other images, the voices of the social actors, and through the accompanying textual context.

Methodologically, this requires a longitudinal documentation of images as instances of sequential interaction in a visual dialogue (Hansen & Flynn, 2015). Especially with street art images, it should be looked at within its temporal, geographic, and spatial social context rather than as a singular product of individual authorship. Its meanings lies in the cumulative effect of a range of practices over time, the result of collective authorship (MacDowall, 2014, p.36) and group creativity (Sawyer, 2006; Awad & Wagoner, 2015). In street art for example, each image is an unstable and permanently unfinished piece of work, subject to material decay, erasure, and transformations as the image and the urban space change (MacDowall, 2014, p.36).

Bartlett's (1932) method of serial reproduction is used to focus on how symbols and meanings of images transform as they are reproduced and appropriated from one social actor to another. Similar to Bartletian serial reproduction experiments (Wagoner, 2017),

following the social life of images shows how they are transformed in transmission; their meanings are elaborated and/or simplified, certain symbols are kept in an image while others are omitted in response to the change of medium, time, or context of the newly reproduced image. The following are different stages in an image's social life and the different meanings that could be analysed from this form of analysis:

I. *Image emergence: Creation, reproduction, and placement*

Image emergence refers to the beginning of the social life of an image as it emerges in a certain time and space by the social actor of 'image producer.' This does not mean that this image did not exist before its emergence; on the contrary, whether the image is an original creation of an artist, or an identical reproduction of a previous image, it has a past life. The past life could include the history of the symbols used in it, the medium and spaces those symbols travelled through, and the previous images this 'new' production is responding to.

Taking the Nefertiti image, graffiti artist Zeff could be seen here as the image producer. He made the composition, stenciled the image and sprayed it onto a specific location in Tahrir Square. Using the analogy of Bakhtin's dialogic theory mentioned earlier, the image is not a novel creation that never existed before in other forms but an 'utterance' in a chain of communication. El Zeff appropriated an ancient Egyptian queen image, relied on the symbols and identification with a historical Egyptian civilization and identity, and supplemented this image with a very contemporary symbol of the protestor's gas mask, a

symbol shared by an international subculture of opposition and street protest. The final form of the image only became El Zeft's own creation by the act of populating this composition with his voice and message and placing it in the very spot he chose in the urban space contributing to its meaning.

## *II. Image Reception: perception and interpretation*

Image reception refers to the process that takes place once the image is placed in a certain context to an audience. Its meaning no longer becomes that which was ascribed by the producer, but is open to the diverse ways an audience perceives it, interprets it, and appropriates its meaning. Images -even the most saturated and banal such as an image of a flag - are not stable, static, or permanent: they are perceived in multiple ways and continuously exposed to multisensory apprehension and interpretation (Mitchell, 1986).

Image reception, perception, and interpretation competencies are connected with image production in a cycle. The cycle unfolds its dynamic within a social, political and cultural context that is shaped by the image producer, audience, and situational factors (Müller, 2008). The interpretation of an image is also an act of positioning and argumentation. This will be elaborated further below in the use of images as tools for positioning. The audience do not just respond to 'what the image says,' but to the arguments they imagine the image to be saying. So their reception of an image is the position they take to this argument (Davies & Harré, 1990). This dialogical social process of interpretation involves sign reconstruction of the image, where signs in an image are constituted and become signs for new meanings in a cognitive and affective process giving new values to

what the image mean, who the audience is, and arguments and counter-arguments produced (Lonchuk & Rosa, 2011).

The reception of the Nefertiti image was analysed in a previous study through photo elicitation interviews with pedestrians (Awad, 2017). The results showed how the reception of the image varied based on the audience's personal, sociocultural background, as well as their political position towards the protest and the role of women within it. The image quickly became a popular and symbolic image for activists representing the role of women in the Egyptian revolution. While for those against the revolution, it was a symbol of the vulnerable and violent position female protestors put themselves in to be part of the revolution. In both groups it was an iconic image that triggered different versions of the revolution's collective memory.

### *III. Image diffusion: circulation and distribution*

The diffusion of an image is closely related to the audience and authority: what they want to see and what is tolerated within a community. Using the evolutionary metaphor, we can think of what makes an image 'the fittest to survive,' and which ones have short social lives and quickly disappear from the public space. Also what criteria make an image 'viral' or make it in social media terms 'troll' and become a 'meme.' Dawkins (1976) was actually the author who coined the term 'meme' in his book *The Selfish Gene*, it was used to make sense of why some widespread human behaviours, from an evolutionary perspective, make no sense in terms of gene survival. For him the meme was the cultural equivalent to a gene, and used the term to explain cultural transmission



of certain ideas and behaviours. The term has been appropriated by online media to refer to viral images that gets imitated and deliberately altered by different users.

Different authors looking at visuals have tackled similar concepts relating to transformative urban images, sometimes referring to them as ‘floating images’ with enduring power that make them travel through multiple virtual and physical spaces producing different meanings (Khatib, 2013, p. 35), or as images producing ‘repeated repertoires’ unfolding continuous dramaturgical performance in the urban space (Abaza, 2013).

In recent media photos there are examples of certain images that got widely circulated till they became iconic representations of certain issues or events. For example, the photograph of the Syrian boy Alan Kurdi’s dead body on a beach shore became iconic of the Syrian refugees crises in Europe. There were several photographs taken of Alan on the beach, alone and of rescuers carrying his body, but a specific one went the most viral: the child alone, with his back to the camera, face to the ground, and with the sea horizon landscape. There were certain aesthetic and inter-iconic qualities, supplementing visuals in public sphere, and interpretative openness for diverse ideological and geographical context that made this specific photo diffuse widely in comparison to other refugee crises photos (Olesen, 2017).

Other images’ life cycles are cut short, in spite of being powerful. Their circulation is inhibited and eventually community-censored. One example is of images of the

September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre. While the buildings with the mushroom cloud became the iconic visual for the collective memory of the event, there were other photos that were deemed inappropriate to represent or commemorate the event and were cut from circulation. These were of the ‘about-to-die’ moment of desperate office workers jumping from the buildings just before the collapse. After those images appeared briefly on TV and in press, they were pulled from media and deemed inappropriate by editors and viewers’. The short-life of those images highlight the negotiation process in relation to which images get to be circulated and get to represent and commemorate certain events (Zelizer, 2004).

The audience for the Nefertiti image was not limited to the pedestrians passing by Mohamed Mahmoud Street. The Nefertiti image was one that attracted international attention, responding to topics international media and international organizations are usually interested in in relation to revolution, women, and the Middle East. This affected the diffusion of the image, its circulation locally and internationally, and its wide distribution from its place in the city to news media and online media. In contrast, its diffusion was limited in official government media in Egypt because of its promotion of the protest and opposition. Its diffusion was also limited in traditional religious oriented media where there would be a different representation of woman other than the ancient Egyptian identity and a different expectation of the place and role of woman other than with a gas mask in a street protest.

#### *IV. Transformation: reconstruction and reproduction*

The transformation of an image is closely related to its diffusion. A widely diffused image is one that is reproduced, shared, and distributed over and over again in different spaces.

One form of reproduction is the repetition of an image without modification, travelling from one medium to another. This could be seen in photos taken of the Nefertiti image and posted online and in the news media. This could also be seen in the same stencil of the image being sprayed on other walls in the city. Even in the act of repetition, the image is still transformed as it becomes autonomous, breaking away from its initial production (Benjamin, 1936/2008) and takes on new meanings by new producers, mediums, and contexts.

Reconstruction is another form of intentional transformation, where social actors take on an image, change some symbols in it, add parts, or omit parts and then reintroduce it into the public space. The reconstruction of the Nefertiti image took many forms. In figure 2 the image producer, Zeft, made a poster image out of the original graffiti image and added the text: 'the voice of women is a revolution.' This statement is an appropriation of a religious common statement that says, 'the voice of women is *awra*.' *Awra* refers to the intimate parts of the body that should be covered according to Islam. Adding the voice of woman to this term is meant as a discouragement of female's voice in public speeches. In Bakhtinian terms, Zeft used 'double-voicedness' by ironically using a common religious statement in order to contradict it and adapt it to his own meanings and intentions (Bresc , 2016; Wagoner, Awad, & Bresc , 2018).



Figure 2

Photo Credit: El Zeft

A further reconstruction was done by ‘The Uprising of the Women in the Arab World’ which is a social movement aimed at showing support and solidarity with women in their day to day struggle for rights as equal citizens in the Arab world. The movement appropriated the image, the name of the campaign was added to the face of Nefertiti and used in some of the movement’s protests and online campaigns. Also another organization that appropriated the image was Amnesty International in its campaign against sexual violence; the image colour was changed into yellow to match Amnesty’s brand and the image was made into a wearable mask that was used in a protest in 2013 in Germany to raise awareness of sexual violence against women. It was also worn in the same year by amnesty activists outside Chancellery in Berlin to protest against state visit of back then Egyptian President Mursi (Reuters, 2013).

Through these transformation, we can see the contentious issue and image meaning elaborated in a serial reproduction chain (Wagoner, 2017): from the producer's original meaning of the presence of women in the revolution, to the voice of women in public space, then elaborated to include all Arab women rights, and travelling to an international awareness campaign of violence against women and political relations.

The reconstruction and reproduction stage is a critical one in looking at censored spaces. After the Egyptian revolution in 2011, the activists' street art was whitewashed by government and visual expression of the revolution in the urban space became a risky act that could lead to arrest. However, the street art images of the revolution were only able to live on and survive through their reproduction into other spaces, through photography, documentation in books, social media, and online media archives.

#### *V. Destruction: Censorship and creative destruction*

Images' lives are very seductive at times, tempting those who do not agree with them to censor or destroy them. Destruction shows the different dynamics of what is tolerated in a certain community, what is deemed appropriate, representable, or offensive.

Destruction can take different forms. One form is the simple act of erasing or whitewashing an image from a city wall. A local authority could decide to do this to images they do not agree with or a pedestrian could spray an image or scratch out a poster they do not accept in their neighbourhood. In the case of Egypt, there has been a systematic and selective action towards whitewashing revolution graffiti, targeting

specifically graffiti against the army while leaving the ones against Muslim Brotherhood (Awad, Wagoner, & Glaveanu, 2017).

Another form of destruction is by censorship of certain images within certain mediums. It could be also by police issuing legal orders to ban the distribution of certain images. Censorship in controlled media such as newspapers could be done directly by authority and news editors, while it is harder for authorities to censor images in less controlled spaces such as the street, and would instead go after the producer by arresting them in the street while painting (Awad, Wagoner, & Glaveanu, 2017). Image copyrights could be also seen as one way of control that limits the distribution and social life of an image.

A third especially effective form is creative destruction, when images are destroyed by counter images. This could be done by creative manipulation of the original image to turn it into an opposite voice. During presidential campaign of El Sisi, stencils insulting him were turned into campaigns for him by the destruction of only one part of the stencil (Awad, Wagoner, & Glaveanu, 2017). Another way is by creating opposing images such as the Egyptian government campaign creating images with opposing meaning to the revolution graffiti (Awad, 2017). ‘The desire to get rid of any image can be realized only through a new image-the image of a critique of the image’ (Groys, 2008, p.9).

The Nefertiti image of 2011 was erased from Mohamed Mahmoud Street together with other revolution graffiti in that street as part of the government’s whitewashing of the revolution traces (Awad, 2017). A further destruction to the image was in 2017, when a

new Nefertiti showed up on the same street, on the wall of a privately managed building. The walls of this building have witnessed several changes since 2011, in 2015 most of the revolution street art images were whitewashed in preparation for a 'street art festival' co-funded by Swedish and Danish institutions, where a group of artists were invited to draw new paintings with the theme of 'unchaining women rights.' The event was quiet controversial, seen by many activists as commodifying street art and the revolution's symbolic street, as part of a 'western' project 'empowering' women with all the moral authority intrinsic to this approach (Eickhof, 2015). Later, in November 2017 the walls of the building were erased yet again; this time a new large image of Nefertiti was drawn sponsored by a paint-company (Figure 3). This time she is a posh Nefertiti with red lipstick and sunglasses. Pictures of the new image were taken by many pedestrians and shared on social media, putting it side by side with Zef's rebellious Nefertiti with the gas mask. Reactions on social media from activists emphasized the re-appropriation of the iconic protest street and the revolutionary street art by those in power. Many questioned the aesthetics of the new image as a sponsored meaningless art when compared to the other Nefertiti that represented the protestors in that same street. The two images symbolize the changes since 2011; from a rebellious Nefertiti battling with her gas mask, to a chic seemingly apathetic and apolitical upper class Nefertiti.

The destruction of revolutionary street art by the Egyptian government has been commonly seen from the scope of oppression versus resistance. But in this case when it is removed and replaced by other 'empowerment' projects, then by a private owner to re-brand a building, it brings into question what are the appropriate images for this street

with all its memories, what is revolutionary, and what is commercial, and who gets to decide. It is a manifestation of power through visual production and meaning making (Eickhof, 2015).

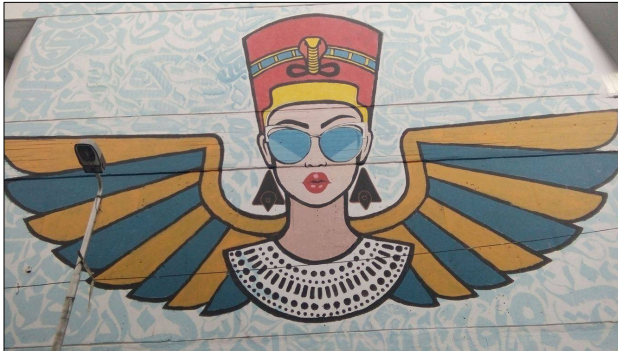


Figure 3 Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Downtown Cairo, captured in December 2017

Photo credit: Mostafa Hanafy

#### **4. Symbolic power of images and their dynamics in public discourse.**

Having through the previous steps situated the image, identified its social actors, and followed its transformation, we now look at what power images could have in influencing the public discourse.

To talk about the power of images, we need to consider their material form, intentionality, and their affordances. Images themselves do not have powers –or lives for that matter–, but rather exercise agency and symbolic power through the environment they occupy and the social actors who appropriate them. Symbolic power is defined here as ‘the capacity to intervene in the course of events and influence the actions of others by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms’ (Thompson, 2005).



From a Foucauldian conceptualization of power as omnipresent, flowing, dispersing, and with no single source, material objects become part of this dispersion of power. This does not mean that they possess power in themselves but rather exercise power through distinctive forms of intentionality and affordances that is dependent on different social actors within a certain common cultural frame of reference. These affordances are also continuously disrupted and transformed through other social actors as well as objects (Joyce & Bennett, 2013).

The affordances of an image in terms of social action are mutually dependent on the properties of its object, agency of its actors, and the cultural context. Cultural norms promote certain interpretations and actions, while restricting others (Glaveanu, 2016). Culture also develops our expectations of certain images, and shapes our own intentionality in relation to them. Affordances and symbolic power are thus continuously developed and constructed in the cultural and historical context rather than predetermined, and are therefore referred to as ‘potential’ rather than ‘given.’ Creativity – in the use of images as powerful tools– lies in ‘the process of perceiving, exploiting, and generating novel affordances during socially and materially situated activities’ (Glaveanu, 2012).

This conceptualization of images positions them as potential political weapons that act and activate, they are not merely objects of human production, but in some sense living historical objects affecting human affairs and politics (Mitchell, 2006). The social life of

images and the different processes discussed earlier speaks of the politics of images. 'Production, circulation, and interpretation of images is part of the collective elaboration of meaning and thus an intrinsically political process' (Rogoff, 1998).

This brings us to the question of what are the politics of images and their potential influence on public discourse? This question relies on an understanding of politics as the contestation over the representation of society, who is included/excluded from this representation, and who is permitted to represent it (Ranciere, 2004). Images could be used as a way of intervening in the distribution of the sensible and have the potential power to reconfigure it by allowing for new ways of saying, doing, thinking, and seeing (Agustin, 2017).

To answer this question I will focus on four actions images could do in public discourse: Create visibility, shape emotions and mobilize action, position different social actors, and commemorate and shape collective memory (Awad & Wagoner, 2018).

*Creating visibility.* The basic communicative use of an image is to represent an absent object, subject, or an idea and make it visible. Images represent something real or fictional, concrete or abstract, they can even give figurative shape to abstract entities such as Justice, or create virtual or fictitious characters that give substance to certain social representations (Lonchuk and Rosa, 2011). Image production in public space thus creates visibility to its content and the group that produced it, producing spaces of inclusion or exclusion. This gives the images a potential to intervene in social knowledge, as they

become ‘figurative nuclei’ of social representations of a community (Moscovici, 1984). Authorities use urban images of the leader to create dominance and control of urban space through monopoly of visual culture, while misrepresented groups would seek visual presence to proclaim public space and produce spaces of solidarity. Images not only represent different groups, but also create alternative representations to reconstruct the public knowledge of certain groups giving substance to different stereotypes. Images are used to symbolically destruct the glorified image of an authority, they are also used to re-represent certain groups as heroes, victims, or criminals.

*Shaping emotions and mobilizing action.* Images trigger an immediate appeal to human emotions. They embody affective symbols that move the perceiver to engagement and possibly self-transformation (Dewey, 1934/2005). They have the capacity to absorb human emotions and reflect them back as a demand for reflection (Mitchell, 2005). In wars, soldiers rally behind a symbol of a nation such as a flag or an ideology such as a cross. In revolutions, images ignite anger and mobilize masses of people behind certain goals. This gives images the potential to mobilize and rally groups of people through condensed visual symbols of an imagined community, thus creating and sustaining certain collective identities. They also condense histories of injustice or state violence into one symbol that arouses emotions, creates a collective sentiment, and mobilizes people behind a certain cause.

*Positioning social actors and creating arguments.* Similar to language, images in their own unique ways, make arguments in response to different arguments within the public sphere.

Through images, individuals position themselves as well as others in response to different social issues, ascribing rights and duties to those different positions (Harré and Langenhove, 1998; Harré & Moghaddam, 2008). Images thus create visual dialogues and argumentation that provokes perceptual, emotional, and representational tension (Markova, 2003). Images among other semiotic systems operate as systems of social positioning and power relationship at the level of interpersonal relationships as well as at the level of struggle for hegemony among social groups (Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

*Commemorating and shaping collective memory.* Images are effective carriers of collective memory, in that they represent the affective relationship communities have with their past (Halbwachs, 1950/1980). They also simplify events into icons that trigger certain reconstructions of memories (Bartlett, 1932). Through image production, diffusion, and censorship, those in power regulate which events of the past are glorified and which ones are concealed and forcibly forgotten.

## **Discussion**

It is common sense that images are not living creatures with independent lives, agency, power, or action, but this approach is meant to help analyse the agency of social actors, the unequally distributed power among them, and the change processes that become possible through what people do with images.

The analytical framework presented throughout the paper has attempted to follow these processes through first conceptualizing images as having transformative social lives in visual dialogues, then by analytically situating the images, identifying the social actors involved and the transformative stages of images, and finally looking at their symbolic power through different influences they can do in the public discourse (Figure 4).

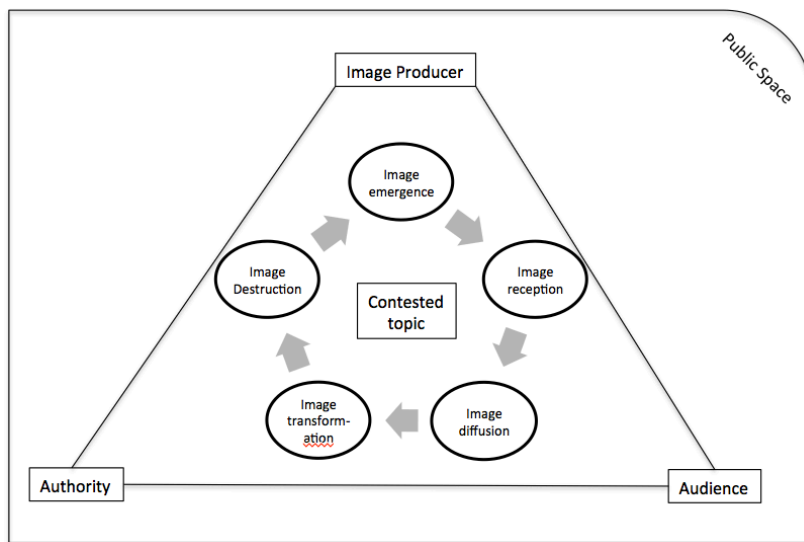


Figure 4 The social life of images' analytical framework

Of importance is the interrelation between the different sections discussed above in understanding images and visual culture, the space an image occupy, its social life, its social actors, and its potential actions are interdependent on each other. For example it is only when an image is achieving significant visibility that its destruction becomes urgent from those against it, but also destruction in itself can trigger mobilization (some images only become popular and effective after they are censored). And also it is important to approach the social life cycle of images as a continuous loop, because transformation or

destruction lead to the creation of new images and thus are the end and at the same time the beginning of the cycle.

Following the Nefertiti image's social life shows different social processes of dialogue, negotiation, contestation, and social and political changes. These processes could be seen through the transformation of the image, the reaction it triggered in each stage, and the meaning it held for different actors across time.

Methodologically the framework opens up multiple sources for data and analysis depending on the analyst point of focus. It could be the image producers in which case qualitative interviews could inform about the process and motives of production, as well as the intended initial meaning of an image. Another focus could be on the reception of images, which could be done quantitatively as well as qualitatively with the help of photo-elicitation methods (Harper, 2002; Radley, 2010). A further analysis could be an in-depth semiotic, iconographic, or content analysis of images in addition to relating those images to others in dialogue through a longitudinal image documentation (Hansen & Flynn, 2015). In spite of the focus of analysis, this framework emphasises how each focus is interdependent on others and cannot be analysed without an understanding of the other elements of the framework to contextualize the image.

Using this framework in urban environments opens up ways to explore how urban spaces get transformed through different visuals such as street art and political billboards and posters, and the critical implications of these spatial practices in changing the definitions

of intentional acts of resistance (Scott, 1990) and political agency. It addresses questions of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), how do certain images turn places into spaces of inclusion or exclusion, promoting certain representations, narratives, and memories, while concealing others.

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