IBRAAZ

Essay

Propaganda Fantasies and Stand-in Heroes

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The following research essay by Foundland, based on visual examples extracted from social media websites, contemplates the appropriation of images and characters from a western context as used for the purposes of propaganda and protest in Syria today. The following examples are brought together as a way of thinking about the use of contemporary popular culture and particularly cartoon iconography as it is appropriated by pro and anti-Al-Assad camps in Syria. What does it mean when images and icons from a western context are used and appropriated within a non-western political context? Do layers of icons bring additional meaning to familiar western characters or do we perhaps need to re-learn a way of viewing them?

Circulated propaganda since 2011

Until the fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in February 2011, social networking sites were completely banned in Syria. Afterwards, the floodgates opened and Internet sites were made almost entirely accessible to Syrians. The strategic opening up of social networking channels on the web meant that the government was suddenly able to spy on its citizens in a way that had never been possible before. Since the uprising began, the ways in which Syrians communicate and organise online has been transformed. Citizens who may have been scared to voice political opinion a year before have increasingly mobilised social media as a tool through which to communicate political will and action.

'Simba, the last Prince of Ba'ath country', research publication, text and images collected by Foundland, 2012 (page 12).

At the same time, however, the Syrian political regime has also been producing propaganda images that it spreads online, portraying the invincibility of the system, and using symbolic metaphors and crude references to good and evil. Images are distributed by means of pro-regime pages on Facebook or via videos on You Tube. The Syrian Electronic Army is a team of people, with government connections, whose job it is to hack, spy and spread online the party line. They have secret headquarters and an official website. They conduct attacks on western websites by hacking and blocking website content and spamming with messages. We speculate that most of the imagery created online, and distributed through Facebook profiles, is carefully orchestrated by this same group. Great attention is given to the creation of image propaganda, especially with the aid of digital manipulation software like Photoshop.

In Foundland's latest publication Simba, the last Prince of Ba'ath country (2012), we trace the original images or .jpegs sourced from the Internet before they became propaganda. Images have been collected by means of a simple google image search in order to find the original source used. These images reveal the myriad images

that can potentially be transformed. Images range from those with religious content to those that refer to nature and the heavens. Most prominent, though, is the prolific use of imagery from Hollywood. Promotional images from the 2005 film The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe are used not only to portray the image of the lion and its connection to the Al-Assad regime (Assad is translated as 'lion' in English) but are also used for their seductive qualities. For image and propaganda producers in Syria, it seems that the use of characters and personae is extremely flexible. For example, image producers have used found images taken from the American war videogame 'Counterstrike'; even if the message they are trying to communicate is anti-American, the cons remain recognisable, yet they are easily manipulated, and are not purely framed by their western context. A lion from a Hollywood movie can just as easily be used to represent a regime.

The Syrian opposition movement relies heavily on its representation online, both for Syrians inside the country but also for

'Simba, the last Prince of Ba'ath country', research publication, text and images collected by Foundland, 2012 (page 20).

a foreign audience. Although the 'face' or identity of the opposition as a fighting force is somewhat vague or fractured, recently there have been specific campaigns released on Facebook that refer to the opposition's inherent lack of hero figures.

One opposition campaign has developed using imagery of statues prominent in the city centre of Damascus, like that of Saladin, the infamous twelfth-century leader. In this online opposition campaign, the statues break out of their stone habits to save the city of Damascus. Perhaps this campaign's concept is more imaginative than that of the regime's borrowed Hollywood images, but its execution is not dissimilar. The same Google image search has revealed that the image pool used for the opposition campaign's visual effects was taken directly from a 2008 PlayStation 3 advertisement. Borrowed for its visual sophistication, but also because it depicts an apocalyptic scene, it is a scene that for some is representative of everyday reality in Syria. What is significant about this campaign is the strikingly similar approach to image-making as can be seen in pro-Assad propaganda campaigns.

In both examples of the use of The Chronicles of Narnia and the PlayStation advertisement, a virtual myth comes alive, making use of the layers of digital appropriation unique to our postmodern times and tools. The influence of slick commercial advertising techniques is clear, however used in a manner that does not aim to be authentic or hide its original sources. The digital images conjured up are entirely virtual in content and form, complete with moralistic messages, antagonistic characters and symbolic metaphors borrowed to illustrate propaganda fantasies.

Graffiti stencils used for the campaign entitled 'Where are you?'. This campaign was initiated by opposition activists and through the medium of graffiti in public space, and asks where the spirit of historic heroic leaders is today in Syria. Image source: https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.339188339490295.77815.285383671537429&type=3.

Where are you [now]?

The opposition movement in Syria is complex and fractured. Much of the footage that we see reported in the international media portrays the opposition movement and the Free Syrian Army as

courageous but out-numbered and with limited resources. In fact, there is a clear difference between those who have taken up arms, and those who have not. Many of the fighters we might see in the media protecting the streets of destroyed cities such as Aleppo or Homs could be those who were always armed and have recently defected from the national army to the opposition. In addition to these fighters are ordinary citizens who have also chosen to revolt in non-violent ways. Famous football players, actresses and public figures have arisen to voice their support of the uprising at crucial moments when morale might have been low. Often these figures are unsuccessful as inspirations, simply because the situation is larger than their sphere of experience. The search for heroic leaders continues.

In August 2012 in Damascus, graffiti started to appear on the streets. The graffiti depicts images of recognisable heroes from history and underneath there is a slogan that reads: 'Where are you?' It is a message left by the Syrian opposition, evoking the spirit of revolution and bravery, which is not necessarily missing, but perhaps lying dormant, waiting to be unleashed.

A profile picture of the Syrian activist page called 'The Chinese Revolution, against tyrant of China', Assad portrayed as China's Hu Jintao. https://www.facebook.com/COMEDY.AND.COMEDY?ref=ts&fref=ts

Opposition activism on Facebook has transformed tremendously over the last two years, from political allegiances being driven initially by very subtle references and metaphors, to a more aggressive presence with less fear of the watching regime. An example of this is the Internet meme or metaphoric reference, known as the 'Chinese Revolution', used in the early days of the revolution. Posing as the 'Chinese revolution', Facebook users were actually referring to the 'Syrian Revolution' but using the Chinese regime as a stand-in for Assad. This remains a strategy that is commonly practiced in countries where Internet surveillance and control is prevalent, ironically such as in China. Syrians like to use humour in order to cope with and react to their difficult political environment.

During 2012, we started to notice more outspoken expressions of political defiance online. We noticed special attention to the use of well-known cartoon characters, as stand-in leaders for the opposition movement. The use of well-known characters naturally makes for viral appeal. It offers the freedom movement an alternative image to that which is seen on the media of a dishevelled and struggling resistance. It transforms the movement into something that is beyond violence and pain, but which triggers the childhood memories in those who are fighting and those who are watching.

Dubbing is used as a strategy for adapting well-known scenes and characters. By dubbing a new audio track over an existing narrative, the maker is able to entirely change the context of the story and characters in a manner that shifts existing meaning, yet maintains a sense of familiarity with much-loved characters. In the example seen here taken from the popular US children's show Sesame Street and featuring Bert and Ernie, a scene from Sesame Street is appropriated in order to tell a different story related to Bashar Al-Assad and his brother. The new narrative is scripted by the opposition movement as protest propaganda. An entirely different interpretation is dubbed over the footage. In the video segment, the relationship between the playful Bert and slightly slower Ernie is reconstituted as the brotherly relation between the feisty Maher Al-Assad and his somewhat less intelligent and gullible brother Bashar. In the video, Maher plays a game with Bashar, in which he needs to connect several signs and symbols to the activities of the regime. He reveals secrets related to torture and violence, of which Bashar seems oblivious, poking fun at the ridiculous nature of the regime and its supposedly secret activities.

Many cartoons have an obvious good/evil dichotomy. The heroes, usually in a male display of solidarity and camaraderie, fight in packs to overcome evil. We have collected two examples of this phenomenon and adaptation for protest purposes, specifically with relation to the use of song. The first is from the cartoon series called Grendizer. Grendizer is a science fiction cartoon originally created as Japanese anime that has been dubbed into Arabic and since the 1980s is extremely popular in the Arab world. In this example, the well-known Grendizer theme song has been adopted by the Syrian opposition, with altered lyrics.

The second example is that of a song from The Lion King (1994) called 'Hakuna Matata' meaning, 'No worries'. The song is adapted and dubbed by opposition activists to: 'Curse you, Hafez', referring to the former president of the country (and father of Bashar Al-Assad) and the role that he played in putting the regime in place. This video makes use of well-known characters and song, but also reacts to the large amount of pro-regime propaganda that makes use of similarly leonine visuals, as outlined earlier. The regime seems to like comparing its Alawite ruling minority to a naturally dominant species.

In the small village of Saraqeb in the North of Syria, we started noticing wall paintings appearing on large walls in the village.

These wall paintings make specific reference to characters such as SpongeBob SquarePants, Mickey Mouse and the Smurfs, have revolutionary messages and are created by locals and especially by children. The group publicise their wall painting on a Facebook group called Saraqeb Walls.

Our first speculation was that these wall paintings represented characters in much the same way as the propaganda using The Lion King, Grendizer and Sesame Street did. However, on closer inspection, what do these friendly characters have to do with revolution? These characters, again with their strong connection to western iconography, are not particularly heroic or brave by nature. These characters are our friends, supporters and are endlessly positive. Their character attributes outweigh their connection to a western context of popular culture. Characters are not perceived by their audience as being necessarily western. These cartoons watched inside Syria are dubbed into Arabic, and therefore become completely removed from their original language.

Characters such as SpongeBob SquarePants and the Smurfs have a very specific connection to the idea of community and sharing. Although in the Smurfs there is the presence of Gargamel as a representation of evil, more significant is the socialistic manner in which the Smurfs live. Their livelihood is borne from their ideals of sharing and cooperation. Each Smurf is named after his role in the community and each person is responsible for their own duties. However, they are always answerable to Papa Smurf, who although just and fair, always has the last word. There is speculation in Syria related to the banning of a specific Smurf episode from the first Smurf's first series in the mid-1980s. In episode eight, entitled 'King Smurf', Papa Smurf leaves the village and brainy Smurf decides to take over and start a revolution in the Smurf village, in a simulation of what could have taken place during the 1980s in Syria in the event of the leader being absent, and the community left to self-determine.

Journey to Ard Al Amal

The vast landscape of stand-in hero characters becomes a mirror for reflecting the desires of a nation in the grip of major upheaval with little hope. As the aforementioned examples show, the appropriation of characters and their personalities for a new context is a practice executed with much thought and humour.

When Walt Disney invented Mickey Mouse in the 1920s, he would never had imagined that his creation would become an international character free of a prescribed personality. As we see Mickey Mouse used today as part of the visual language of protest, it is evident that image-makers do not feel limited by the signified origins of Mickey's personality, although they are without a doubt aware of it.

An example of this is the appropriation of a puppet character that closely resembles Mickey Mouse, and is used as part of an anti-western television series in Palestine called Tomorrow's Pioneers. In this television series, which is broadcast on a Hamas-affiliated TV station, the Mickey Mouse character is completely disconnected

A screenshot taken from 'Adnan and Leena' as used in Foundland's installation at CBKU, Utrecht, as part of the exhibition The Impossible black tulip of cartography, October 2012.

from his western counterpart. He is outspoken in his anti-western views, and encourages Palestinian children to fight against their enemy Israel.

Symbols become detached from their origin in a distinctly non-western approach to the re-interpretation of images. The invention of the cartoon animation is arguably an American phenomenon. Its influence on non-western cultures, especially manga from Japan, and eventually its interpretation into anime, has made the separation of west and east both unrecognisable and unimportant.

Future Boy Conan, for example, is a Japanese anime series that was first shown in Syria in the 1980s in Arabic as 'Adnan and Leena', while the original script was written in the 1970s by an American science fiction writer. Still, no matter from which perspective, east or west, Conan or Adnan, the protagonist faces down all the odds for survival after his city is destroyed, and continues his journey to the fictitious Land of Ard al Amal ('The Land of Hope').