

Lessons in Dissident Design: The Study of Visual Rhetoric Applied to Counter-Authoritarianism

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INTENTIONS

Visual Rhetoric, the study of argument through images, is a field that has as of yet barely been applied to the study of Counter-Authoritarianism. The purpose of this study, then, is to develop this inter-disciplinary relationship by examining aspects of visual rhetorical design as they relate to counter-authoritarian movements.

Through analyzing the rhetorics of dissident visuals and their externalities, this research forms actionable recommendations for activists worldwide.

By arguing for the creation of collectivized, standardized visual rhetoric, this study intends that movements will also create structural systems to support said processes. The formation of which should improve movement longevity. (Tufekci)

USAGE OF COUNTER-AUTHORITARIANISM

Given, as it will be in this examination, that authoritarianism exists to some degree in all structures which restrict fundamental human rights, such as self determination and freedom of speech, counter-authoritarianism will be applied to movements that challenge this societal tendency, irrespective of government structure specifically.

ANALYSIS OF NEW-LEFT POSTERS

The posters produced in opposition to the war in Vietnam, and by the New Left generally, successfully harness abstract imagery and symbolic combinations to produce strong rhetoric. For example, the piece “Amerika is devouring it’s children” conveys the highly complex and nuanced argument that the US has been corrupted or driven mad by militarism, quickly, and while utilizing highly striking imagery to leave a lasting visual impact upon the viewer.

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THESIS

Whether a counter-authoritarian movement is revolutionary or simply societally oppositional, if it intends to disrupt present circumstances to the benefit of the masses, its rhetoric ought to do at least two things: provide cause and evidence for anger at the systems it opposes, and prompt the audience to think critically about how that system affects them, i.e. its flaws.



Reads: May 1st :
Worker's day of
Solidarity

ANALYSIS OF SOLIDARNOSC POSTERS

Solidarnosc's posters differ strategically from their American counterparts (they place more focus upon hope, resilience, and solidarity) but they do share key design processes. The May Day poster above conveys many meanings, among them the power of the laborer, the popular mandate of the movement, and the power of polish identity, in a concise and striking medium. Importantly, it also conveys the power of the movement to the authorities and makes the viewer critically consider their position within the movement. Doing so can motivate both audiences in highly useful, if not necessarily positive ways.

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

To be more rhetorically and strategically effective, dissident movements should create visuals that prompt viewers to:

- Think critically about the system the movement is dissenting.
- Remember how they've been wronged.
- Know that they have power and can enact direct change.
- Participate in and value organized collective action.