

The Socio-Political Poster in the Digital Age

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Abstract. *The socio-political poster has always been at the core of the society, defining its culture, its economy or worldview. Used to convey messages or announce upcoming major events, posters have experienced a spectacular development throughout the 20th Century: as an art form, an advertising tool or a pure reflection of the society. In the contemporary digital age, the socio-political poster has been seriously transformed according to the demands of activist communities and the feedback of the general public. The present article intends to address a series of issues related to this transformation of the socio-political poster in the digital age, focusing on the perspective of the creator of the poster. First of all, we will point out the characteristics of the activist movements, the online or cyberactivism and the culture jamming phenomenon to state the socio-cultural background that influences the creator of the poster. Next, we will designate three major conditions that lead to the creation of a particular graphic style, recurrent and recognisable for the socio-political poster: the recomposing graphic elements, the return to traditional graphic techniques and the reconsideration of the authorship through the copyleft exercise. Last, but no least, we will include a series of examples from the socio-political poster creation practice, which will support and illustrate our affirmations.*

Keywords: *socio-political posters, cyberactivism, culture jamming, graphic style, copyleft.*

Introduction

The socio-political poster has always been at the core of the society, defining its culture, its economy or worldview. Used to convey messages or announce upcoming major events, posters have experienced a spectacular development throughout the 20th Century: as an art form, an advertising tool or a pure reflection of the society. In the contemporary digital age, the socio-political poster has been seriously transformed according to the demands of activist communities and the feedback of the general public. The present article is a continuation of a PhD research entitled *Practices to Produce and Use the Poster in the Contemporary Social-Political Activism* that we held in 2012 at the University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca and intends to address a series of key problems related to this transformation of the socio-political poster in the digital age, focusing on the perspective of the creator of the poster. This article will elaborate more on three important issues. First of all, we will point out the characteristics of the activist movements, the online or cyberactivism and the culture jamming phenomenon to state the socio-cultural background that influences the creator of the poster. Next, we will designate three major conditions that lead to the creation of a particular graphic style, recurrent and recognisable for the socio-political poster: the recomposing graphic elements, the return to traditional graphic techniques and the reconsideration of the authorship through the copyleft exercise.

Graphic design and socio-political activism

The socio-political art is a form of conceptual art in which the idea expressed, regardless of its form, has a social and political foundation. Any style of art may be socio-political, which makes it closer to a philosophy rather than an artistic style *per se*. Often, the artist may feel the need to express an opinion and try to produce a change in society. In order to convey the idea, the artist mostly uses the analogy for transmitting the message and for presenting the arguments. Therefore, the reaction of the viewer is crucial in this artistic process. The effort to interpret falls upon the viewer. The socio-political art wants the viewer to understand the relationship between art itself and the concept that the artist wants to convey, to also reflect „what I have to say” and not just „what I see” (Aristizabal & Lefer, 2010, p.246). Shocking words or powerful images literally create an interactive work of art which shows beauty or the problems of human existence. Parody and satire are the tools used to imprint a concept in the collective imaginary through biting humor, while the socio-political artist is involved in a cultural rebellion, a revolution that is transmitted from one person to another.

Graphic design is the largest artistic form comprising socio-political messages, in itself describing a broad-based field of activity, encompassing design for print, advertising, moving graphics and animation for TV, and all manner of visual

communication and design and includes projects from both professional artists (graphic artists, designers) and amateurs. An important contribution to the study of the socio-political graphic design is brought by Liz McQuinston (McQuinston, 1993) (McQuinston, 2004) who depicts the struggles of the contemporary society and focuses on the part that graphic arts can play in expressing these struggles. The visual language inherent in any graphic production refers to various elements such as style, symbolism, typography, tone, historical or artistic references which communicate a message with a particular force or emotion. Media and technology are fundamental for the resonance and the reception of the message, as different methods of image-making and duplicating (like handwriting, stenciling, photocopying, hand-stampling, silkscreen, offset litho, linocut) can provide immediacy and emotional impact (McQuinston, 1993). Since the '60's, as McQuinston states, posters are the most utilized forms of graphic design for rendering a socio-political message, functioning at their best when communicating a direct, simple idea in a visual arresting manner, with an instant impact towards literate or illiterate audiences. Still, after the 90's, the roles of mainstream communication formats are being redefined towards participation, involvement and interactivity, thus their forms being reconsidered and creatively restructured.

Understanding the framework that determines the socio-political activism requires a deep knowledge of the phenomenon known as culture jamming. It is a unique and creative form of resistance to the changes in society, manifesting as „an organized, activist effort to counterbalance the imposing of the consumerist message as a predominant message“ (Carducci, 2006). Such a resistance can be found in various forms, as an eclectic collection of subcultural practices, ranging from various types of media sabotage to the alteration of billboards, posters and graffiti elements. This phenomenon is specific to the contemporary society, where freedom of expression is inherent and those aspects that are considered wrong or irresponsible practices are not covered by traditional media as expected.

According to known jammers such as Mark Dery (Dery, 1993), culture jamming is an attempt to jam the transmissions of the corporately owned consumerist-industrial-media complex in which we live today. Dery suggests that the public must reconsider the mental environment in which they live, respectively the daily signifying systems, mostly present in advertising.

Another contribution identifies culture jamming as the act of reorganizing the media in a way that gives new meaning to images - a meaning that carries a political message or social commentary aimed at exposing questionable political assumptions behind commercial culture. Therefore, culture jams can help create a sense of transparency about a product's production impact by presenting images that quickly communicate the realities hidden behind the corporate logos or brands (Pickerel et al., 2002). Naomi Klein (Klein, 2000) discussed the metamorphosis

of *culture jamming*, that she defined as an “X-ray of the subconscious of an [ad] campaign, uncovering not an opposite meaning but the deeper truth hiding beneath the layers of advertising euphemisms” developed as a reaction to media consolidation and the impediment of free speech by the hegemony of the consumerist and corporate discourses. Culture jamming uses *memes* to subvert cultural conventions: “memes are condensed images that stimulate visual, verbal, musical or behavioral associations” (Pickerel et al., 2002). A *meme* can be an instrument with which jammers hack into conventions and introduce new meanings into people’s mental image of their society, the environment, their daily habits, etc. (Mercea, 2006)

The culture jamming phenomenon is, however, much broader than a reaction to the consumerist system or the media practices, including subversive activities against government policies or social practices and stereotypes. It may appear as vast campaigns with successive and sustained manifestations or as disparate activities that do not fit into a predetermined strategy. The basic elements of culture jamming are three motivational aspects that are forming three sides of a conceptual triangle: social criticism, entertainment and design, aspects which are not mutually exclusive. On one side of the triangle is social criticism. There are critical goals and motivations behind the jammers’ cultural activity. In most cases, these motivations are aimed at creating a social, political and economic conscience. An example is the work and writings of Kalle Lasn (Lasn, 1999) founder and editor of the *Adbusters Magazine*, who pities the way people across the globe, aspire to the so-called American success, to the false sense of progress and the issues arising from hyper-consumption which is causing major environmental damage. His criticism is aimed at corporations, which, by acquiring ownership of the media, suppress the citizens’ right to free expression and perpetuate the existing problems within the culture of consumption. Jamming, through techniques meant to expose situations, has the ability to create awareness and concern regarding the issues mentioned above, even if indirectly. Determining the public to reflect on one issue, even if only for a few moments, means their involvement in the social reality in which they live. In this respect, culture jamming is an extended war of ideas, ideologies and visions of the future. The second aspect of culture jamming is entertainment. In general, altering advertisements and subversion can be fun and liberating, not only in terms of the practices themselves, but rather in view of the effect they have on others. The third aspect, design, is closely linked to entertainment. This aspect of culture jamming refers to the activities in which activists get involved in order to create a semiotic world for themselves by creating and recycling existing images and culture. This includes two levels. The first is the design or re-design understood as physical activity involving artistic creativity. This type of activity can be fun and intriguing as it involves creating or re-creating

things within certain limits set by existing images. Culture jamming manifests itself by redirecting the symbols representing intrusive practices of the mass culture. The area of expression can range from a website to a blank wall or the advertising space of a known company. Banksy, the well-known London artist, has a manifesto prompting artists to exhibit their „work“ in the public space, a wall being, in his opinion, just as good for a work of art as a canvas. He is known for the unconventional locations of his works: Tate London, British Museum, Trafalgar Square.

As for the programmatic message, culture jamming or socio-political activism can be seen as a struggle for independence. The protests of culture jamming are, in most cases, a resistance movement against the other, which is dominant and inflexible. There are various motivations behind the different culture jamming activities, which can usually be found as manifests that attempt to legitimize or, at least, clarify them for outsiders. Culture jamming is not only aiming to offer criticism, which may be positive or negative, on some issues, but also to challenge individuals to adopt a critique of capitalist and consumerist mass culture. It is a reaction to the mass cultural power which the jammers believe enforces collective and imperative codes to its participants. In this context, it remains a challenge for the artist creating visual messages to keep a balance between entertainment and the educational side.

Socio-political activism in the digital age

Online activism has grown along with the Internet and is founded on the basic principles of the Internet: freedom of expression and public participation. Two directions have been identified in the study of the effects of technology on social movements (Earl & Kimport, 2011). On the one hand, there is the argument that information and communication technology has increased the size, speed, and reach of activism but has not had any definitive effect on the mobilizing structures, opportunity structures, or framing processes underlying activism. Activism has expanded, but the processes enabling organization and participation have not changed. On the other hand, social scientists argue that the implementation of new information and communication technologies have changed the actual processes of organizing and participating in activism by changing mobilization and protest both quantitatively (bringing out more people) and qualitatively (fundamentally changing the forms of activism and protest).

Originally appeared in the form of petitions and followed by other forms of expressions such as email campaigns and online boycotts, online activism began to be accompanied by visual elements designed on one hand to increase the notoriety of the case and on the other hand to help better awareness and information. Michael and Ronda Hauben (Hauben & Hauben, 1997) describe the

role of the citizen actively involved on the internet, calling it „netizen” seeing the Internet as a possible revival of democracy and a revitalization of society. The Internet has created a system where news and information flow are no longer a central system that provides information, but everyone on a bottom-up, totally new, which changes totally the way people relate to the society.

Online activism is a series of proactive actions designed to achieve a specific purpose, usually reactive against authoritarian bodies whose activities are contrary to the law or infringe the rights of certain categories. On a first examination the forms of online activism can be classified into three defining categories. The first, awareness / advocacy refers to the fact that within the online sphere the public may be better informed and sensitized on a particular issue which can be social, environmental, human rights-related, etc. The second, organization / mobilization refers to the fact that the public is asked to take a stand, to take concrete action, the action often involving the participation of a larger community of people. The third, action / reaction refers to the call to action, involving either the mobilization of other categories or activities involving civil disobedience, boycotts, sanctions. In terms of information flow, this classification separates the public into two broad categories: there are those who communicate and those who are communicated, that is, those who mobilize and those who are mobilized. Therefore, the Internet becomes an impartial and uncontrollable environment for streaming all message types not subject to censorship process, both in terms of message content and in terms of its exposure level. Regarding the transmission of accurate information to the public formed a group that uses only alternative means of information on the Internet at the expense of traditional media outlets: print, radio, television. They are often censored, especially in countries where regimes are found to dictatorial or authoritarian power. Internet mail distribution has two major advantages over traditional media: it can reach a much larger audience than traditional media coverage, and may be made public at no cost or very low cost.

Socio-political posters in the digital area

As the popularity of virtual environment interaction developed through social media pages, socio-political art has found a new form of expression. Websites such as MySpace, Twitter, or Facebook, Google+, etc. allow users to easily share views through artistic representations worldwide. When a user shares a picture or poster with his friends, while the message is transmitted, the concept emerges. People who have not previously had a necessarily artistic voice, can retrieve and distribute, through social media, these artistic representations touching both the visual representation and the consistency of the message. The socio-political component of virtual work becomes paramount since the distribution action is clearly an act of open expression seeking the acceptance of an idea. Thus,

'digitalization' and the shift towards the use of social media as main channel of communication and campaigning are deployed as tools for producing poignant political satire, for raising awareness, and for trying to foster social change (Ratiu & Iacob, 2013).

Artists have always had the ability to influence and change opinions on a very large scale through stories, music and visual representations, educating and liberalizing culture, helping to spread tolerance and peace in the world. By the end of the 1990, campaigns on the Internet had become a very common tool for political activists from both developed and developing countries. Visual elements began to have an increasingly higher importance, going on a „picture is worth a thousand words“ principle, because it succeeded best in synthesizing and clarifying the issues in question.

„Post it on your wall“ continues the liberalization process of the poster in the socio-political activism. The manner this trend manifests broadened its scope through social networking. The poster power to influence the mind becomes a key instrument of participatory democracy more effective as it is based on anonymous production (in most cases) and co-distribution. The continuous flow of information from the virtual environment, democratize participation in the „city life“ especially as the number of co-participants involved in the aesthetic expression of social beliefs has never been more widespread, more assumed and more appropriated to the idea of “creative-commons”.

Once with the advent of social networking, every internet user can automatically become an activist, a campaigner, even an artist, since he has a lot of handy tools that can communicate or create freely. Online activism behaviour is characterized by three major situations: sharing, aggregation and collaborative production. Sharing content online is by far the most common. Aggregation and production cooperation are forms of group interaction through which individuals join and engage in achieving a common goal.

The challenge of the public space has developed significantly by addressing the new medium of expression. This was done by adopting free speech, in many ways, in an area where the public opinion constantly needs to reaffirm its criticism and control credentials. The socio-political activist can claim in this environment only that he had a say and helped in opening this space, but the final agreement and contribution in spreading an idea belong to the user. Thus, the expression of the many led to an augmentation of the civic discourse in cyberspace, and only a step was needed from there to the proliferation of cyber-activism. Statements like „caring is sharing“ broadly describe the phenomenon as found in the current cyberspace. Liberalization online action, synthesizing visual representations and their adaptation to the online environment has fostered co-participation in social activism projects online. These efforts have become a norm among socially active

young people, concerned about the direction society is heading and aesthetic visual representation ensures better dissemination of the desired information.

Poster or put it on your wall!

When analysing the socio-political posters, scholars have mainly considered the content of these posters, their message, the inherent symbols or their impact on the viewers: the visual expressions of social movements through images and other visual artifacts that allows an understanding of how images provide activists with a symbolic resource to attain resonance in different contexts (Doerr et al., 2013), the semiotic analysis of techniques used in the digital environment which are often a blend of parody, collation and paraphrasing, (Mercea, 2006) or the analysis of artistic procedures such as appropriation, recycling or detournement as artistic tools for the rendering of the message (Ratiu & Iacob, 2013). In the interest of providing a practitioner view on the graphic design manifested within the visual expression of the socio-political manifestations, we will further discuss three major conditions that lead to the creation of a particular graphic style, recurrent and recognisable for the socio-political poster: the return to traditional graphic techniques, the recomposing graphic elements, and the reconsideration of the authorship through the copyleft exercise.

When creating a poster, the artist starts from the multiplication technique and the print format, as they define the working method. The limitations determined by each technique should not to be seen as a barrier to the good communication and impact design of the poster. If they are known in detail, they can be fruitfully exploited in the artistic creation. Currently, the online presence is a must for any social campaign. From the point of view of the artist who creates the image and the posters for a specific campaign, this environment has to be perceived as any other medium of multiplication, like printing for example, and the knowledge of its advantages and limitations will bring major benefits to the effective communication of the insightful visual creation. Although online presence has become almost mandatory, most posters should work as well on the street, they must be legible in both the digital and analogue environments. The production of the socio-political poster is initiated from the premise that it should be easily reproduced, thus cost effective or not expansive at all. This is a condition for the composition of the poster, thus generating the return to traditional techniques (such as linocut, screen-printing, or photo-copying, stencils) which enable the quick multiplication but introduce some creative obstructions.

The poster has become a tool that should serve activists in achieving their goal and this has decisively influenced the composition and the construction of social posters in the last decade. The author often voluntarily waives the „authorship“ and expects his work would be used by many people and applied to different

environments. The creator often puts the final files to the public online, or the so-called „do it yourself“ kit (DIY) to be downloaded and copied by anyone interested. The fact that there is no guarantee of how a poster will be multiplied and that this will no longer be controlled by its author (the creator who designed it and „put“ it online) led to the recovery of the „cheap“ multiplying techniques. The clumsiness inherent in the poster’s reproduction by people without any artistic experience reinforces the idea of truthfulness, but it also provides, to those who reproduce the posters, a sense of belonging to the cause and thus an impulse for their mobilization. All these direct the poster creator to the use of simple elements, very often reduced to a single colour and the essentiality of forms. Techniques such as templates, screen printing, black and white photo-copying, or redesign with overhead projector (projecting the image on the printed surface) reduce the multiple shades of colours to plane colours. In the same time, the use of fonts that mimic handwriting or the free drawing, often unrefined, lead to the idea of „HAND MADE“, and thus augmenting the feeling of authenticity and accuracy. In addition stencils, spray or aerography can be used to reinforce the same idea of veracity. The materiality brought by these techniques has created a style that identifies the social posters, making them easily distinguishable among the others. We cannot generalize, but we could observe that this style becomes recurrent even when posters are printed with more advanced techniques.

In the digital age, the socio-political poster loses parts of the graphic touch, giving up the details and the „refinements“ and there is a general tendency of iconization. In the digital age, the posters do not stand by themselves anymore, they do not work independently, as their copies will appear on computer screens, mobile phones and pads, from the moment of their creation. More than that, in the online environment, posters will be constantly disturbed by the surrounding elements: buttons, menus, or advertising predefined areas. Such diversity of formats from *full screen to thumbnails*, or the horizontal or vertical composition requires the creator to build on well-defined items that can be resized without being altered. Their composition should also be usable for other media such as badges, T-shirts, banners, etc., thus they should be constructed from separate visual elements that can be reused, resized, deleted or magnified accordingly. Therefore the header constrains the creator of the poster to compose the work in divisible parts, in visual elements that can be fully subsequently recomposed. The interactivity with the viewer becomes the priority, whether we refer to websites, blogs, or Smartphone applications, thus, the creator of the poster should carefully consider its impact and re-using condition. The social poster has come to transit both the digital medium (in which it is conceived) and the analogue media (where it stands alone by multiplication or exposure) to return then to the digital, by the re-post of an image on different sites or social networks

or by its transmission on TV channels, thus re-composing itself in a different form or format.

Due to the re-use of the graphic elements in the digital media, the socio-political poster has entered an area which troubles the issues of the copyright. More, the essence of authorship is questioned and critiqued. Once with the development of new media and the social networking, Open Source licenses, Creative Commons and GNU Free Documentation, originally developed for software, are increasingly applied to works of digital art or computer art and especially to the poster with social message. The GNU Free Documentation License confers what is called a copyleft for the free use of a product / name / artwork, through which, instead of granting the owner the right to restrict copies, the owner of a copyright grants the *users* the right to copy and share programs, so that the content can be used, modified and distributed freely to other users, with the condition that they continue to share the content freely after their intervention. (Coleman, 2013).

Because of these licenses, and the importance of the social networks, artists and activists have found this way to promote their messages and to reach a wider audience. The poster becomes ammunition in the hand of those who fight, and, thus the author is less important than in its final impact and effects. It is the author himself who often incites the audience to remixing and encourages others to unleash their creativity. During the *Sharing* on the social networks of a socio-political message / poster it becomes almost impossible in the majority of the cases to preserve the author's identity and by its remix, re-adaptation, or the appropriation of the graphic elements in various forms and future works, it becomes often difficult to find out which was in fact the original work and which is the result of this copyleft process. Thus, new digital technologies along with the Internet have opened up enormous potential for what has become known as "remix" – cutting, pasting, mashing, sampling etc. No longer are end users or consumers seen as passive receptors of information, but rather in the process of distributed and peer production, consumers can take on the role of producers. (Fitzgerald & O'Brien, 2005)

If for the „mainstream“ set the idea of identity and authorship is extremely important, in social art since the early 1990-2000 we witness a change of emphasis. The author goes to anonymity for most of the time deliberately, to reinforce the message itself. Unlike the earlier periods when the artwork was deemed „inviolable“, in the social activism campaigns online, the very author „incites“ to its re-mixing by providing activists and other interested public the original files which can be easily downloaded and processed. A fine example is the Cluj-based Mindbomb project, which, by its public actions initiated in Cluj-Napoca and other cities of Romania, has become one of the most powerful socio-political critical voices in Romania in issues such as the democratisation of the public space, the

safeguarding of the national patrimony and natural resources etc. Within all their series of collective actions and visual manifestations through public posters, they did not claim any copyright for the use of their creative works, still the only common element, recurrent in the posters is the Mindbomb logo that appears on all. The Mindbomb members have always believed the message they want to convey is more important than their identity and wanted the focus to fall on it, so they (as individual authors belonging to the Mindbomb community) remained totally hidden and anonymous. Teamwork is one of the defining features of the Mindbomb community and because Mindbomb posters are not author posters, they have become a „common good“ that was modified at different times or by other different groups, organizations or even members of the civil society.

The poster power to influence the mind becomes a key instrument of participatory democracy, which is more effective as it is based on anonymous execution (in most cases) and co-distribution. The poster is a tool that serves activists in achieving this goal and this influences decisively its very status in the contemporary digital age. Due to the multitude of sources of inspiration and the intentional relinquishment of copyright, the social poster is a powerful tool, without which no social campaign could be conceived. We are certain that many of the posters with the activist message will enter the art history, but the focus will be on the message, as the author will remain unknown.

Conclusions

The present article brings into the discussion the perspective of a practitioner, of a creator of the poster and is elaborating on three important issues that we consider essential for the development of the socio-political poster in the digital age. First of all, we pointed out the characteristics of the activist movements, the online or cyberactivism and the culture jamming phenomenon to state the socio-cultural background that influences the creator of the poster. As we wanted to provide a detailed practitioner view on the graphic design manifested within the visual expression of the socio-political manifestations, we discussed three major conditions that lead to the creation of a particular graphic style, recurrent and recognisable for the socio-political poster: the return to traditional graphic techniques, the recomposing graphic elements, and the reconsideration of the authorship through the copyleft exercise. The poster has become a tool that should serve activists in achieving their goal and this has decisively influenced the composition and the construction of social posters in the last decade. The social poster has come to transit both the digital medium (in which it is conceived) and the analogue media (where it stands alone by multiplication or exposure) to return then to the digital, by the re-post of an image on different sites or social networks or by its transmission on TV channels, thus re-composing itself in a different form

or format. Due to the re-use of the graphic elements in the digital media, the socio-political poster has entered an area which troubles the issues of the copyright. More, the essence of authorship is questioned and critiqued and the author often voluntarily waives the „authorship“ and expects his work would be used by many people and applied to different environments, thus the author is far less important than the final impact and the effects of the socio-political posters.

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