

SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIES IN UNDERGROUND GRAPHIC PRODUCTION OF THE "SOLIDARITY" MOVEMENT IN 1980S POLAND

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Abstract

The original logotype of Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity" was designed by Jerzy Janiszewski when the strike in the Gdańsk Shipyard broke out in August 1980. It spread quickly throughout Poland and began its afterlife in countless interpretations and travesties created spontaneously by multiple "Solidarity" members and supporters. After the proclamation of the Martial Law in December 1981 "Solidarity" movement along with its visual identification were forced to move underground. From that moment on, the logotype and its many variations became a useful tool of political activism. "Solidarity" graphics were reproduced in underground printing houses and ordinary citizens contributed widely to the political struggle by designing and producing subversive graphics based on the well-known image of the logotype. Functions of these graphics varied from expressing support for the political opposi-

tion, integrating the community connected with the movement, ridiculing the enemy to a simple propaganda. The aim of the paper is to examine the strategies used by the producers of the anti-communist graphics and to capture the specificity of the "Solidarity" graphic activism by making a distinction between the resistance and the subversion.

Main text

The aim of the paper is to capture a specificity of the graphic resistance movement in the 1980s Poland by contrasting it with widely known culture jamming or subvertising movements in Poland and beyond, namely in 1968 Paris and in Poland after 1989. This comparison will lead to the conclusion that despite some apparent similarities between some strategies and aesthetics of graphic design activism in its various embodiments, there are some crucial differences between design activism in a capitalist reality and in a

totalitarian country. These differences, in my opinion, are connected with the place of the subject of such actions: inside the system in case of a capitalist country and outside it in case of a totalitarian one. So my point is that the success of the anticommunist design activism lied in a fact that its actors were situated outside the system, therefore they were able to produce a serious threat to the authorities they opposed.

Historical introduction

From the very first days of the strikes in 1980, the movement, which later become the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity, had a very characteristic visual identification. According to Jerzy Janiszewski, author of the Solidarity logo, the idea of designing a logo came from a need to support the striking workers. First of all, Janiszewski started to think of a slogan and wall inscriptions were his direct inspiration. He realized that the word "solidarity" appeared many times. So the word "solidarity" came first. Then Janiszewski elaborated the lettering of the word and here he was also inspired by the slogans written spontaneously on the walls. Eventually he conceived the idea of joining the letters together to make them look as people in a dense crowd carrying a Polish flag (Daszczyński 2005).

Soon the logo became extremely popular so numerous unauthorized variations of it and the "Solidarics" typeface appeared on the walls, banners, prints, and so on. People simply re-drew it in do-it-yourself way and the logo became literally ubiquitous. So the logo, inspired by the wall slogans came back to the

walls re-interpreted in more or less successful ways. What is important, the logo was often reduced to or replaced by some distinctive features, such as flag or red hand-written letters. This was sufficient for making the message clear and to connect it with the Solidarity or anti-communist movement in general.

When the Martial Law was proclaimed the "Solidarity" logo along with the trade union itself were banned. "Solidarity" went underground and so its entire "printing industry". People employed easy to use techniques, such as silkscreen, used poor paper and limited colours, usually black and red. "Solidarity" stamps are a good example of typical samizdat publishing of the underground opposition. Most of them were silkscreened but these created in the internment camps were made using a perforated foil and seal ink. The stamps were used to raise the funds for the operating of the underground opposition.

The excerpts from a book entitled "Visual Propaganda" from 1987 are especially useful to give an idea of the importance of the "Solidarity" dissident graphic design:

"In 1980-1981 Poland was an issue to a special penetration of Western ideological sabotage. It was expressed by a wide range of diversionary radio broadcasting, culture and sociological propaganda. This propaganda spread consumer patterns and lifestyles, supported pro-western attitudes of certain circles, created a myth of Western and especially American lifestyle. (...) Another direction was an informational and material support for illegal anti-socialist organizations in our coun-

try. (...) The leaders of anti-socialist organizations which penetrated and took possession of Solidarity structures, attempted to fight with the socialist party with numerous forms of visual propaganda. Streets and houses of Polish towns were covered by a wide range of posters, leaflets, sign-boards, inscriptions and photomontages. Using achievements of psychology and sociology as well as material and technical support from Western anti-communist organizations, propaganda staffs of Solidarity initiated a so called poster war. The crucial elements were: disinformation, destabilization and discredit.

Using national symbols for the propaganda actions was an obvious abuse. National flag colours which were widely recorded in a social awareness as a symbol of patriotic actions were used to escalate antinational and anti-Polish actions. It needs to be reminded that white and red were the Solidarity logo, strike flags, layout of Solidarity newspaper and so on. Unprecedented propaganda campaign against Dziennik Telewizyjny (TV News) was aimed not only to formally discredit it, but first of all to infect on a social trust to the mass information media which were at the disposal of social and professional forces of the socialist state. Collapse of the official visual propaganda was to open the door to the monopoly of anti-socialist propaganda.” (Wojtasik 1987)

This fragment tells us two things: first of all, the communists seemed to really believe in power of symbols and images, thing they called visual propaganda. In the times of a wide access to television, radio and other

media which are more effective than posters, they still considered posters or leaflets a serious enemy. Secondly, the author doesn't give any positive example of contemporary communist propaganda, which suggests he was aware of its weakness which is visible in the last sentence.

Apparent similarities: May 1968, Solidarity and contemporary subvertising

When thinking about history, there is always some kind of temptation to see things as parts of some bigger structures, to look for similarities and continuities, influences, inspirations, and common grounds. So my first idea was to see what happens if we compare the Solidarity graphics with the analogical production of other social movements of the second half of the 20th century. Prints made in May 1968 in Paris by the famous Atelier Populaire seem similar to the “Solidarity” graphics. From the other side, contemporary graphic activism connected with such activities as culture jamming, subvertising and so called billboard banditry, seems also to have a common ground with the anticommunist graphic design.

Source of similarities: graphic language of resistance and strategies

What are the common features of this kind of grassroots graphic design movements? We can call it following Teal Triggs who writes about punk fanzines, the graphic language of resistance (Triggs 2006). To put it briefly, it is simple, rough, made using unprofessional tools and without professional skills. The message is clear and direct. Rough stylistics

of this language stresses the immediacy of a message and the transparency of design and production process itself. This sensation makes the message trustworthy, especially in a situation where professional tools and technologies are monopolized by the power against which we struggle: authorities in case of France and Poland, corporate capital in case of subvertisers.

Closely connected to the graphic language of resistance there is another term, so called the aesthetics of failure (Drozdowski 2009). It's an artistic strategy which is based on a strictly controlled "anti-technique", which is of course a matter of choice, not of the lack of skills. By intentionally ignoring the rules of aesthetic correctness, it aims at resisting the dominant aesthetic conventions and, as a result, a dominant system. What is important, there wouldn't be any aesthetics of failure possible if there weren't any normative aesthetics or codified rules, which is very important here. While the visual arts freed themselves from any aesthetic conventions 100 years ago, in graphic design there are still normative rules which tell us whether a piece of design is correct or not. So in case of graphic design, it is very easy to create and distinguish the aesthetics of failure. Nonetheless, we have to consider, whether in case of Solidarity this aesthetics was intentional or not. I would claim, that in this case the specific aesthetics of failure was a side effect of the limited access to the professional tools and materials and professional designers.

The graphic language of resistance is closely bound to the do it yourself activity, but only in

a very wide sense as an activity of people excluded from a professional market by gender, class, education or political views. But if we take a closer look at the DIY ethos, we can see that there are significant differences between this kind of activities in a dissident graphics and in anti-capitalist graphics. In case of anti-consumerist activities, DIY is a form of an alternative economy, independent from marketing, consumerism, and so on (Krajewski 2010). By making the things ourselves, we oppose the system which makes us buy and throw away. This is also a symptom of an attitude which is based on a special attention paid to material objects – instead of throwing away, one can repair them or re-make them. But in case of Poland in the 1980s we cannot speak about this kind of ethics. DIY was simply a must, the only way the political opposition could produce their own prints and ordinary citizens provide themselves with necessary products.

Another apparent similarity between the anti-capitalist and anti-communist language of resistance lies in their strategies. Here we also have to go back to the legendary May 1968 in Paris and to the theory of Guy Debord and the Situationist International. In order to struggle against the spectacle, Debord proposed some strategies, such as diversion (*détournement*) (Debord 1994). They consisted in taking piece of ready-made cultural artifact out of its original context and placing it in a new one. The fragment could also be a subject of changes and interventions. This strategy is more or less what the subvertisers are doing, but it can also be traced in some

interventions the “Solidarity” activists made in the symbols of the communist regime and authorities. However let’s not be deceived again by the appearances. In Debord’s theory the strategy of diversion was aimed at revealing hidden, subversive potential of popular culture texts. In our case, there is no hidden potential in communist Party’s symbols. In some cases, however, we can see the mirror image of the diversion strategy. The subversive content is what is hidden, not revealed. In anti-capitalist activism the logotypes are transformed in order to reveal their actual meaning. Here the actual meaning is concealed, hidden beneath the nonsense, an ordinary word or a childish drawing.

These remarks lead us to the notion that there is no direct connection between activist graphics in a capitalist society (France in 1968 or Poland today) and in a totalitarian country. Underneath the similar form, there are crucial differences which highlight the specificity of graphic design activism in communist Poland.

What are the reasons of such differences? Of course, we can explain them by a simple notion that anti-capitalist or anti-consumerist activists in France or contemporary Poland have struggled against capitalism and the Solidarity activists struggled against communists. But in my opinion this distinction doesn’t give a satisfying answer. Finally, the Solidarity movement was also a leftist one in its beginnings. They didn’t struggle for capitalism, they struggled for a just, democratic society and so were the Parisian revolutionists. The difference lies in a distinction be-

tween the cultures of resistance and the social movements of resistance – the distinction made by Ewa Rewers following the definitions of Manuel Castells (Rewers 2010). In the book entitled “The Power of Identity” he writes: „Resistance identity is generated by those actors who are in possessions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society” whereas “the project identity is when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure.” (Castells 2000). Here, in my opinion, lies the difference. In case of anti-capitalist actions, the actors build the new identity, whereas in case of anti-communist struggle, the actors oppose the oppressive system. According to Ewa Rewers, it is apparently the same thing (fighting against the power mechanisms), but in case of the cultures of resistance there is an important critical component which lacks in the social movements of resistance. The critical theories are based not outside the contested system, but in the very centre of it, which is a crucial difference to the dissident movements.

Similar thing is pointed by Łukasz Ronduda (Ronduda 2006). He claims that the term “subversion” has often been used in relation to the artistic appropriation connected with the critical art. It has a technical component

which relates to the physical operations on an object, like the above mentioned diversion, transformation or destruction a ready-made fragment of a cultural text. From the other side, term “subversive” means a kind of critical attitude towards a dominant culture, but still, formulated from the inside of the criticised reality, by a subject involved in it.

Therefore we can make a distinction between a resistance and a subversion, where resistance is performed from a position of an outsider, and subversion comes from a belief that there is no outsider’s position possible.

In case of capitalist society, I think we can all agree, there is no way to take a position outside the system. As Ewa Rewers has put it: “Any project critical to the modern *promesse de bonheur* eventually appears to belong to the same logic it denounces.” (Rewers 2010). What capitalism does is assimilating all intentions to undermine it by reconfiguring the critical statements in order to make them work for it. Contemporary media feed themselves with the news about the acts of transgression and controversies. No matter what are the latest news, it matters there are the news. Therefore no wonder that today nobody cares about the critical actions of billboard banditry, subvertising, and so on. They belong to the same logic that the entities they protest against. And this shift explains why the communist authorities really cared about the resistant graphics dissimilated by the Solidarity activists in the 1980s as we can observe in the passage cited at the beginning of the paper. They were produced from the out-

side and they didn’t belong to the system they struggled against.

As Marek Krajewski noticed, such activities as subvertising, culture jamming or street art paradoxically reinforce the system because they reproduce its own rules, such as attractiveness, novelty, spectacularity, and so on (Krajewski 2010). Therefore what is needed is not a subversion but a resistance which in case of today’s graphic design means not producing the numerous anti-something projects and prints, but by not doing certain things. It is not spectacular but it seems the only way graphic designers can oppose the system – not contributing to it.

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