



SIGNS OF REVOLT

The Sign, the City and Revolution in the 21st Century
Noel Douglas

Signs of Revolt, the Sign, the City and Revolution in the 21st Century

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Abstract

We are living in an revolutionary epoch. The collapse of Neo-Liberal Capitalism in 2008, effectively ended the political consensus of the last 30 years. Combine this with the crisis of Climate Change and the waves of austerity being offered as the only solution by various Governments across the world it is clear the near future will be characterised by social conflict. Across the world the resistance to these crises grows and while different in character this wave of revolts is interconnected both by the enemy it faces¹ and by the parallel development of something which itself is revolutionising social relations, namely the maturing forms of dialogical networked social media that are allowing citizens across the world to share their stories and form collective subjectivities of resistance.

In this paper I want to look at the effects of Neo-Liberal ideology in shaping contemporary visual culture and how resistance takes shape in various visual 'signs of revolt' in response. To do this, I want to use, and make an argument for, the dialogical models of the Sign and communication put forward by the Bakhtin School, especially the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin himself and his colleague Valentin Volosinov because, I would argue, they provided a vital critique of both mechanical and Structuralist semiotic models inherited mainly from Saussure and the Post-Structuralist response to Structuralism in the 60's. This critique anticipates much of what the Post-Structuralists claimed in their attack on the shortcomings of Structuralism, and in a framework which is superior to both sets of ideas. This matters because, as we shall see, these are still the dominant models taught when any semiotic understanding is required in Design and a revolutionary epoch requires that we rethink and reassess all our theories to see if they are fit for purpose in a changing world.

fig.1

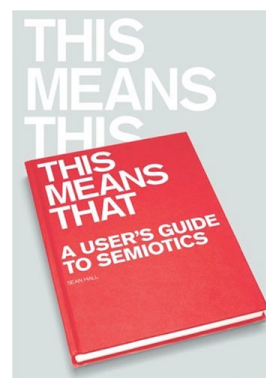
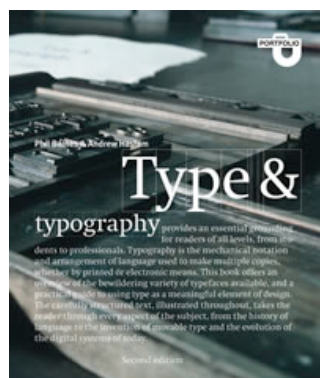
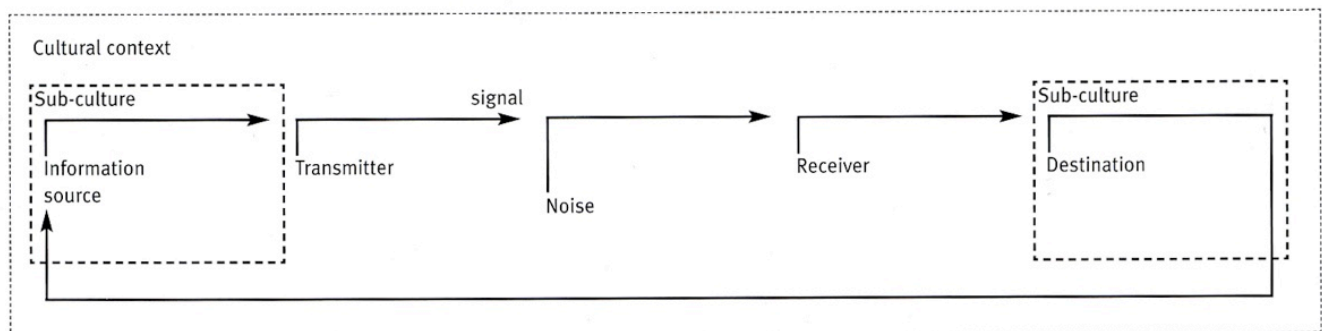
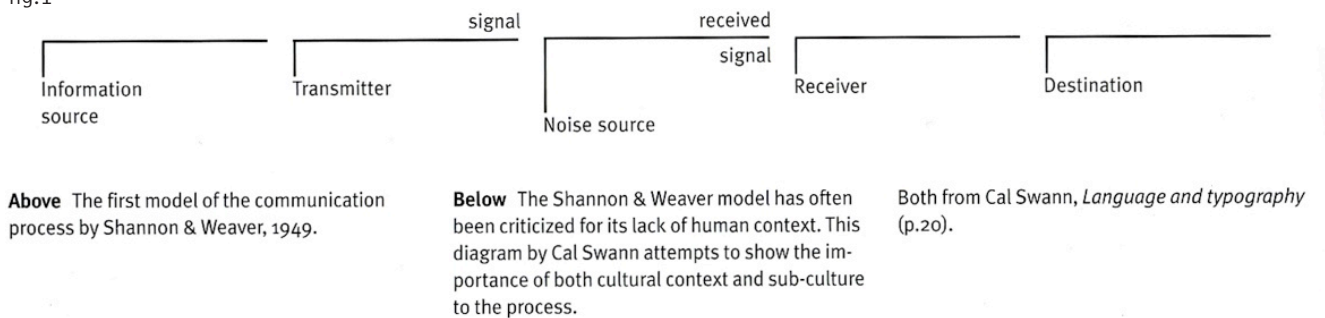


fig.2

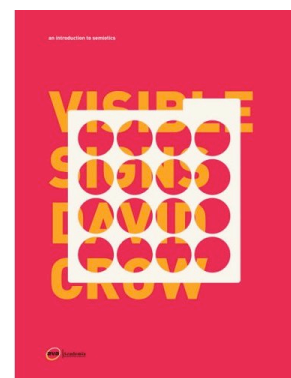


fig.3

fig.1 Diagram of how communication 'works' in *Type and Typography* by Andrew Haslam and Phil Baines Laurence King 2005

fig.2 *This Means This, That Means That* by Sean Hall Laurence King 2007

fig.3 *Visible Signs*, David Crow AVA 2007

Theories of Sign. Why Bakhtin and Volosinov Matter Now.

It is still common place to see diagrams¹ like the one used in *Type and Typography* by Andrew Haslam and Phil Baines in mainstream text books aimed at students of Art and Design. Here language is treated as if it were communication between machines not human beings, the language used is one of machines, transmission, receiver, signal etc. Other contemporary semiotic guides like Sean Hall's *This Means This, That Means That* at least acknowledges the Bakhtin School but places it as one theory among many, as does *Visible Signs* by David Crow.

In place of these, I want to argue the case for primary importance of the dialogical theories of the Bakhtin School for any real understanding of how communication actually works. I want to argue that the dialogic quality of Signs put forward by that school embraces several aspects that set their understanding of Signs clearly apart from Structuralist notions. For the Structuralist, words are units of language whose meanings are defined by their relationships to other words. Unlike the Bakhtinian concepts they have neither an author nor an addressee.

But when people actually use language, its importance to anyone trying to understand it lies in its relation to the specific circumstance in which it is used rather than to its theoretical ideal as defined in a dictionary. Such dictionary definitions give language its necessary stability but are only abstractions.

This non-identity of language explains how language can be in its state of continual, if often imperceptible, change. The language which Saussure proposes is only an abstraction against which this change can be perceived. Were it the reality of language, language-change could not take place. The critique of the absolute identity of words led to the collapse of structuralism in the late '60s and early 70's.

But Post-structuralist thinkers threw the baby out with the bathwater, while they argued that the relationships between the Signifiers to the Signified are complex and mediated they prioritised the non-identity of language. Mikael Leiman puts it like this,

*"For Lacan, the important mediator was the repression that severed the chain of Signifiers from any direct relationships, or association, between the Signified. Derrida shreds our hopes of ever getting in touch with 'the transcendental Signified'. Whereas de Saussure placed the Signified in the limited part of the brain where it is connected to its acoustic image, Derrida brings it within the text that implies an infinite regress of interpretations of Signs by other Signs."*²

Put simply while Structuralism absolutised the identity of Signs, Post-Structuralism absolutised their non-identity.

The Bakhtin School's concept of Sign challenges both views in that fully acknowledges

the mediating functions of Signs while preserving their referential aspect. As Volosinov says

*"The meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context ... [but] the word does not cease to be a single entity; it does not, so to speak, break into as many meanings as there are contexts for its usage."*³

What the Saussurean school and models that follow can't adequately handle is living speech, in other words people in everyday life using Signs in order to develop their relations with each other in real interactions. Attention to living speech became a mark of the Bakhtin school and this is why I think they're theories must be popularized partly because we are living in an era of heightened struggles over meaning with potentially species ending conclusions⁴ and partly because the now dominant communication form, Social Media, is an intensely dialogic form, one where the idea of knowledge as emanating from single, authoritative, closed sources is dying and in its place an all embracing idea of knowledge as collective, relational and dynamic.

The interesting thing about this is how it echoes the democratic potential seen by theorists and activists in the 20s for forms of mass communication. The ideas of Bertholt Brecht and the Russian Productivists who produced the *LEF* journal who developed the idea of the 'operative writer' who is at once a sociologist, photographer, economist, filmmaker, producer, a master of the new apparatus like radio—as in Brecht's 1927 essay *Radio as a Communications Apparatus*—and the Productivists Sergei Tretiakov's idea of a two-way newspaper where listeners/readers become broadcasters/writers and vice versa.⁵

There are at least these five features in the Bakhtin School approach:

1) The role of utterance; 2) voice and voices; 3) dialogicality and multivoicedness; 4) social languages; and 5) speech genres. It's beyond the scope of this paper to address all of these in detail so I want to focus on the idea of multivoicedness and the types of Sign 'genres' in contemporary urban environments and struggles which will touch on some of the other concepts.

Two Faced

*"This social multiaccentuality of the ideological Sign is a crucial aspect, thanks to these intersecting of accents a Sign maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development yet the very same process also makes it the Sign makes it a refracting and distorting medium. The ruling class strives to naturalise the Sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle to make the Sign uniaccental. In fact each ideological Sign has two faces, like Janus. Any current curse word can become a word of praise, any current truth must inevitably sound to many people as the greatest lie. This inner dialectic quality of the Sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes."*⁶

Let's start by looking at a few examples of how the ruling class

attempts to 'make the sign uniaccental'. In fig.4 one we see the front pages of all the major British newspapers the morning after the 50,000 strong student march protesting the tripling of tuition fees for University courses in November 2010. This demonstration saw a mass invasion of the Conservative Party headquarters at Millbank, near the Houses of Parliament, students entered the building and unfurled banners from the roof, thousands more joined outside. Although the protestors initially walked in to an open building a little later a few of the windows in the foyer got smashed, and it is the picture of the hooded student protestor doing a flying kick into the window that was the image used across all the medias front pages. A number of things can be said about this. Firstly thirty years of Neo-Liberal policy has seen a huge concentration of Capital and no less so in the Media.

*The global media system is now dominated by a first tier of nine giant firms. The five largest are Time Warner(1997 sales: \$24 billion), Disney (\$22 billion), Bertelsmann (\$15 billion), Viacom (\$13 billion), and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (\$11 billion). Besides needing global scope to compete, the rules of thumb for global media giants are twofold: First, get bigger so you dominate markets and your competition can't buy you out. Firms like Disney and Time Warner have almost tripled in size this decade.*⁷

So it should be no surprise that in this situation the Corporate Media reflects more and more the values of the Ruling Class, so here the picture used works to reaffirm all the clichés of protest and protestors so beloved of the Media and the Establishment, that they are aggressive, irrational, violent, 'brainless' and 'hijackers' of a peaceful protest and therefore 'others' unlike 'us', labeling in this way of course means the very real reasons for the protestors anger can be dismissed.

Another interesting aspect of the crisis and a way we see the 'struggle come fully out into the open' is the crisis of legitimacy within the Ruling Classes, Media and Police Forces. The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few⁸ has produced high levels of corruption in Western Democracies. An example of this is the unravelling and corruption is the scandal



fig.4: Front pages of UK Newspapers November 11 2010

that has engulfed the Murdoch media empire in the summer of 2011. Editors at the *News of the World* were found to have been guilty of illegally hacking mobile phones, not just of celebrities as initially thought, but more distastefully the family of a girl who had been murdered, who were led to believe she maybe still alive during the hunt for her because the journalists hacking her voicemail made it seem possible she had picked up a message when she hadn't. I touched on the dialogical nature of social media in the introduction and around this huge story, as with all major world events now, the use of communication tools like Twitter become forums where people respond to the establishment narrative of the event in visual and verbal ways,



fig.5



fig.6



fig.7

fig.5: The Conservative Parties Election Campaign Poster for 2010 featured a heavily retouched portrait of leader David Cameron this was the target of a series of parodies collected at: <http://mydavidcameron.com/> These reference the close relationship between Cameron and Murdoch and Rebecca Wade, the editor of The News of the World and the employment of former News International Journalist Andy Coulson as his Press Officer.

fig.6: A Twitter response points out the undermining of Democracy by Murdoch's Media Ownership.
fig.7: As the News of the World was shut down, News International registered the name, The Sun on Sunday making many suspicious that Murdoch planned to reopen the paper under the new name.

fig.5,6,7 are just some examples I collected from Social Media as the Murdochs were brought before a government committee to justify their actions. In a sense the connectedness of social media communication makes explicit Bakhtin's notion that all communication is dialogical, that is, an ongoing stream of communication in which our utterances are both shaped by all previous utterances and then we continue this process, and shape future utterances, when we express ourselves through words or signs.

This destabilising of the Establishment framing of social conflict can also be seen in the Social Media response to the riots that hit the UK in the summer of 2011. All riots are both complex

and political even if the participants are not expressly making political points. One feature of these riots was the wholesale looting of sportswear outlets like JD Sports. There can be no question, I feel, that this was an understandable response from youths in deprived areas who are largely the customers of these shops (sportswear being the uniform of inner city youth in UK cities), and the advertising and corporate cultures that have stoked the desire for those commodities are themselves a form of containment in that they limit the imagination to dreams of consumption.

Take fig.8 and fig.9. In fig.8 Nike churn out yet another ad that plays of the signifying power of 'revolution' though of course this is contained by



fig.7: Billboard ad for Nike, taken in London 2010



fig.8: Billboard ad for JD Sports, taken in Manchester 2010

being the a revolution purely of 'you' the individual, as consumption requires continual individual reinvention. Fig.8 which is a photograph I took of a billboard in the same Manchester high street the rioting occurred sees the young consumer either as JD sports intend, content, surrounded by his shopping bounty or in an unintended but nevertheless interesting way looking trapped behind the glass almost drowning in his purchases, the position of the camera only adding to the goldfish bowl effect, by giving the effect of his face being pressed against the glass.

The riots need to be understood within the context of the UK Coalition Government's austerity drive which as well as education cuts, is also cutting back social programmes, in the areas most

affected by the riots⁹. Again the anger directed at the Government finds it's outlet on Twitter in a battle of signs. The use of montage, facilitated by cheap computer software, is the political aesthetic par excellence, once the province of artists and specialists it is now part of the everyday language everyone can speak with, a peoples' 'multiaccentuality' if you like.

This active response with images was given a surrealist twist by sites like Photoshop Looter Fig.9-17 that used the power of crowd sourcing to produce images that range in their 'accents' across a broad range of anti-establishment views.

This more obvious live and conflictual aspect that Social Media has made possible, of responding and launching media orientated counter



fig:9 Image from tumblr site *Photoshop Looter*, lots of images referenced the forthcoming London Olympics which will happen in the same parts of East London as some of the riots.



fig.10: Image from tumblr site Photoshop Looter, <http://photoshoplooter.tumblr.com/>



fig.11

fig.12



fig.13



fig.14

fig.11,12,13: Responses to the riots on Twitter.
fig.14: David Cameron was on holiday abroad when the riots happened, hence the beach ball!



fig.15: *The UK Prime Minister, David Cameron gets an unannounced visit.*



fig.16: Image from tumblr site Photoshop Looter, rioters 'perform' for X-Factors judges.



fig.17: Image from tumblr site Photoshop Looter, a strangely utopian image from the wreckage of the riots.

attacks to an establishment that oversees a less and less democratic Capitalist system is something I think will continue to grow in the near future. A final example from this summer of both the Corporate attempt to recuperate real world struggles (make uniaccental) and the détourned response that pulls apart this recuperation to open it up again to questioning (make mutilaccental) is the *Go Forth* ad campaign for Levis¹⁰ which features people confronting Police in some kind of urban revolt as a male voice implores us to make our world our own, "this is your life" he says, "don't let it be clubbed into dank submission" this 'live without dead time' Bukowski, beat talk echoes directly 60's radicals like the Situationists. Released just as the riots started in the UK, it was pulled from there but was still used in the rest of the world. As John Berger said in *Ways of Seeing* nearly forty years ago, adverts must make products seem "exotic enough to be arresting, but not close enough to us to offer a threat"¹¹ so advertising is always walking this tightrope of using the excitement of real word events but in a way that attempts to constrain and capture that excitement into a purchase, another form of uniaccentuality of closing down possibilities rather than opening them up. But in a highly connected world and with network technologies that allow us to answer back this attempt to constrain through commodification becomes harder and harder and so the inevitable response came a short while after, *Go Forth and Revolt*¹², the détourned version used the simple device of providing the activist voiceover answering back as titles over the images ending by imploring us to 'Go Forth, And Destroy Capitalism'.

This viral quality of Social Media, what magazines like *Adbusters* would call 'Memes' are also I think reflected in Volosinov's idea of the Ideologeme, these are ideas that within inner speech (our internal dialogue) there can develop as half-formed expressions which remain private and incompletely formulated or grasped precisely because they cannot find answering echoes in speech with others, and so remain locked up as irritants unless or until they can achieve open recognition and affirmation through being shared, developed and enriched by mutual discussion. I think this is what Social Media is allowing social movements to do, to find each other and affirm each others views, and when this happens the utterance goes 'viral', if this can be combined with a live social movement it becomes incredibly powerful, so this is what I want to address in conclusion.

Create Ethical Spectacles

*Ethical Spectacle is a dream self-consciously enacted*¹³

The idea of the Spectacle and involvement with it has, since the Situationists in the 60s, been seen as problematic and in an era before Social Media this was undoubtably true, there was no way to answer back to the TV or Radio. But this has changed in

our networked world. Stephen Duncombe proposes we now use the idea and tactic of the Ethical Spectacle, this is not the Spectacle as the new world - Fascist and commercial spectacles promise this and in this way becomes a substitute for dreaming - Ethical Spectacles offer something else.



fig.18: Video Still from detourned Levis Ad *Go Forth*.

*"The Ethical Spectacle is a dream put on display. It is a dream that we can watch, think about, act within, try on for size, yet necessarily never realise. The Ethical Spectacle is a means, like a dream it performs, to imagine new ends. As such the Ethical Spectacle has the possibility of creating an outside—as an illusion. This is not the delusion of believing that you have created an outside, but an illusion that gives direction and motivation that might just get you there."*¹⁴

One of the problems with the damage Post-Modernist theory has done to critical thinking was to focus on the problem of Representation, in so doing ignored what Mikael Leiman calls the 'Epiphanic quality of Signs' that is, that Signs seem to make present that which they Signify as he points out:

*"This phenomenon is so mundane that we tend to disregard it. When we read books or newspapers, watch TV news or films, we know that we deal with semiotically mediated events. However, these mediators seem to put us in touch with the things they pass on, provided that we recognise and understand their meaning. We tend to believe in the Signs and in what they convey. This is more than 'representation'. It is participation and involvement."*¹⁵

Advertising agencies recognize this need for involvement, one of the ways the business of branding has gone as advertising reaches saturation level and the dialogic quality of social media makes it more difficult to find a captive audience to sell to compared with older forms of media, is to try to put the consumer 'inside' the 'brand experience'. Take T-Mobiles flash mob ads, the idea here (stolen from activists art group like Improv Everywhere in New York¹⁵) is not to sell you a phone but play on human beings love of collective fun and put you 'inside' the 'brand experience', to involve and get

participation which will hopefully rub off in a good feeling about the brand and a purchase of a mobile phone. But in this it still remains a Spectacle as it merely attempts to affirm the way things are.

Commodification devours possibility, the joy of consumption surpasses all other values however much it lives off them at the same time.



fig.19: 'Life's For Sharing' T-Mobile Flash Mob at Liverpool Street Station, London.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ3d3KigPQM>



fig.20: Improv Everywhere action Grand Central New York, a flash mob freezes on the spot for minutes.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwMj3PJDxuo>

Contrast this with an action like the one taken by Reverend Billy and the Church of Earhthlujah in the Tate Modern as part of an ongoing campaign to get Oil company sponsorship out of the arts in the UK¹⁶, which instead uses the Ethical Spectacle to not replace the real with the Spectacle but “to reveal and amplify the real through Spectacle”¹⁷.

This action was a piece of focused de-branding, the BP logo itself was ‘exorcised’ during the ceremony from Tate Modern. The logo, a green and yellow sunflower, which itself is to many people ‘the greatest lie’ as it tries to depict BP as an environmentally friendly corporation¹⁸ and this logo was subject to aesthetic attack itself during the Gulf of Mexico spill.



fig.21: Reverend Billy and the Church of Earhthlujah exorcise BP from the Tate Modern, July 2011.

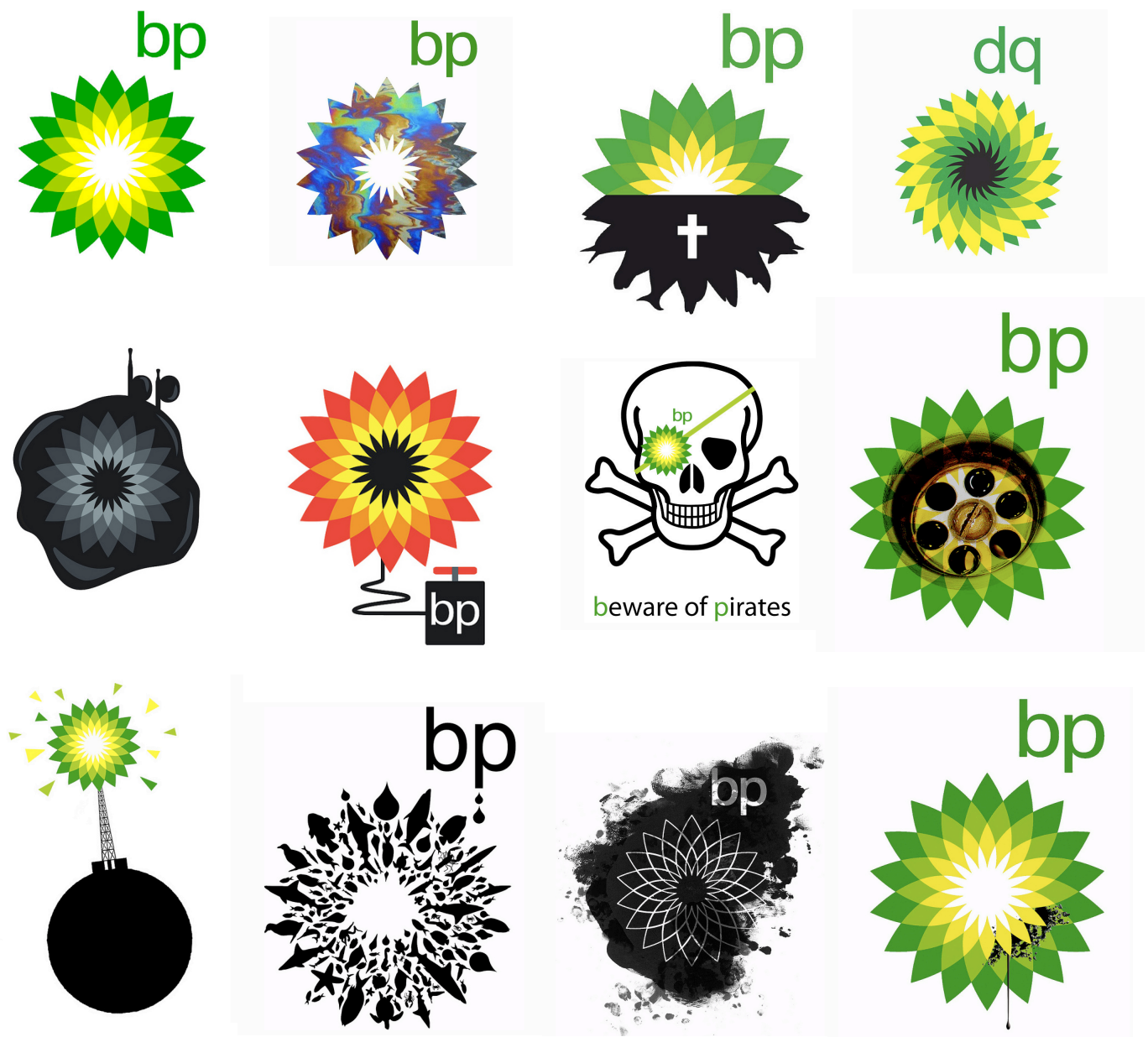


fig.22: "Any truth must sound to others as the greatest lie". Activists debrand BP, after the Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill the original logo is top left. Images from Greenpeace's Behind the Logo, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/greenpeaceuk/sets/72157623796911855/>

The importance of de-branding in recent struggles is also shown in actions taken by UK activist group UK Uncut¹⁸ in the actions they have taken against tax dodging companies like Vodafone, Topshop and Barclays. The case of Vodafone is interesting because it links the struggles in the UK with Egypt. In the UK Uncut has targeted Vodafone stores and occupied them for being let off a £6 Billion tax bill by the Government¹⁹, in Egypt Vodafone tried to claim credit for the Revolution because they aired an Ad that showed protests in Tahrir Square with a voiceover that says,

*"We didn't send people to the streets, we didn't start the revolution ... We only reminded Egyptians how powerful they are."*²⁰

causing uproar among activists as the company was one of many who sent out pro-regime text messages to the Vodafone network and on the orders of General Murabak shut down their networks in the most militant phase of the Revolution in 2011.



fig.23



fig.24



fig.25

fig.23,24: Debranding Vodafone, above and right: examples of subvertising. fig 25: Egyptians protest outside Vodafone in Oxford Street, London, the tweet sent out by Vodafone after all networks were shut down.

In both cases a combination of images, network technology and action has forced the UK government to open up an investigation into Vodafone's tax dodge and seen the offending Ad pulled in Egypt.

Finally this year we have seen a clear example of the link between sign and movements in actual urban sites of struggle, from Tahrir Square, Egypt to Plaza Del Sol, Madrid and elsewhere as the Occupy movement grows across the world. Part of the strategy of taking public squares is to recreate them as dialogical spaces, not spaces

of consumption. What is remarkable is the sheer amount of Signs, across the range, witty; clever; defiant; hopeful. A wonderful display of creative resistance. Bakhtin's view on Sign-Sign relationships is useful here and quite different from the Saussurean and the Post-Structuralist emphasis on distinction as the determining factor of the Sign, it expresses the moment well-

"But no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate... The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group... The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue."²¹

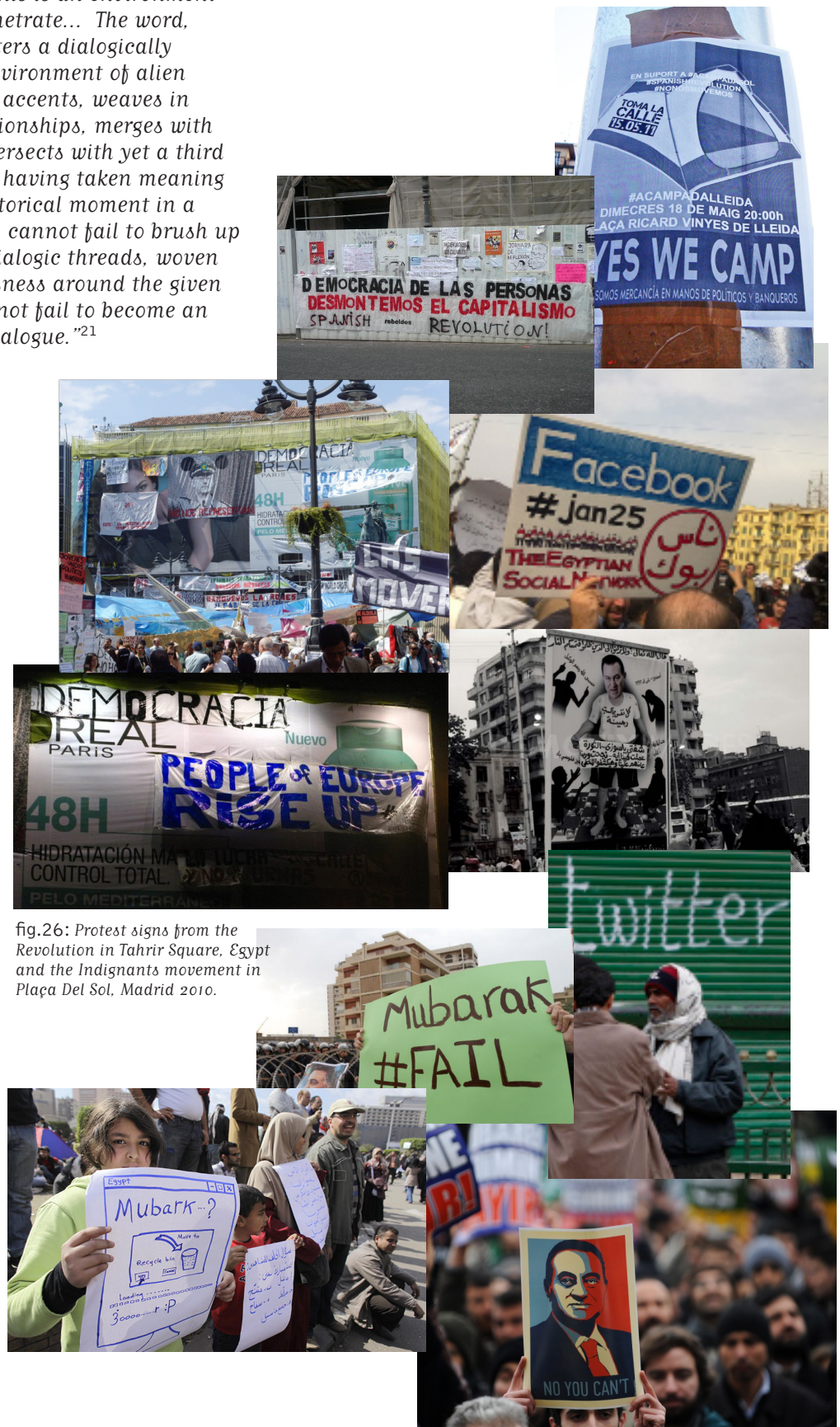


fig.26: Protest signs from the Revolution in Tahrir Square, Egypt and the Indignants movement in Plaza Del Sol, Madrid 2010.

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