

[Mhajne on Dal, 'Cairo: Images of Transition - Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt, 2011-2013'](#)

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Mikala Hyldig Dal. *Cairo: Images of Transition - Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt, 2011-2013.* Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014. 286 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8376-2615-5.

Reviewed by Anwar Mhajne (University of Cincinnati) **Published on** H-War (March, 2016)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Cairo: Images of Transition: Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt 2011–2013 is an edited volume that examines the ongoing relationship between aesthetics, politics, and visual communications of various political groups throughout the Egyptian revolution. It surveys the visual transformation of Cairo’s public space after the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on January 25, 2011. Egyptian activists created narratives using graffiti and street art, integrating “symbols, messages and icons of common reference into the urban landscape [to] transform the surfaces of the city in an all-encompassing editing process” (p. 7). By analyzing visual materials like images, graffiti, symbols, and posters found in public spaces, contributors to the volume illuminate the importance of these aesthetics in political processes. This edited volume includes an impressive archive of photographs that document street art as an interventional form of communication. The text challenges dominant narratives of the revolution by attending to power relations in the context of visual communication. It also addresses how narratives depicting the demonstrations as “antifascist” and “pro-democracy” were designed to satisfy Western audiences. *Cairo* moves beyond these hackneyed tropes to reveal how contextually situated structural issues, like neoliberalism, helped produce the revolution by fostering systemic social inequality.

The book is separated into three chapters. The first chapter is “Meta-Image Tahrir.” This introductory chapter provides a foundation for understanding the significance of visual communication in Egypt’s transitional period. It does so by clarifying the role of visual materials in a political context. The second chapter, “Politics of Representation,” offers readers an overview of the visual communications employed by political parties during the 2011 and 2012 elections. The chapter reflects on the ways representations of candidates were shaped by gender, religious orientation, and socioeconomic status. It shows how informal interventions produced by artists create a parallel discourse concerned with “examining, commenting [on], or rethinking the practice of the democratic process” (p. 8). In the final chapter, “Urban Transformations,” the contributors “document the palimpsest of political messages on a street level as layers upon layers of campaign posters, street art, and graffiti accumulated to form a tangible second skin on the city” (p. 9).

The first chapter directs the reader “towards the image-politics at play in the reciprocal relationship between the political process and its visual representation” (p. 16). It addresses the influence of the revolution on Egyptian conceptualizations of public spaces. Before the revolution Egyptian “public policy and urban planning, like most governmental matters, were filtered through the harsh lens of state security” (p. 21). During the January 25 revolution, Egyptian activists reclaimed and occupied urban places and transformed them from sites of government control to sites of contestation and

reclamation. This chapter evaluates the centrality of Western notions of online social networking and digital spaces in mobilizing protestors, to relocate the success of the revolution to “the occupation of physical urban spaces” (p. 21). The realization of the revolution was achieved by “producing, perceiving, and distributing images, [where] the protesting subject re-appropriates the power of control and interpretation of his own image in urban space” (p. 29). In order to situate the visual materials produced in these urban places meaningfully, a translator must be able to “‘carry across’ the different narratives and layers of the revolution as part of a complex set of dialectical relationships with other texts (political, economic, social, and religious) that exists outside its immediate ‘readable’ boundaries” (p. 41). Many Arabic and Western media outlets mistranslated the revolution by framing it within narratives that are popular with Western audiences. Media outlets framed the events as acts of contestation against a dictatorship and as nonviolent pro-democracy demonstrations. These dominant narratives effectively silenced the structural dimensions of injustice and obscured the role of neoliberal policies in sparking the revolution. By doing so, “these accounts helped set the post-colonial stage for the now empty shells of the old regime to be replaced by another that maintains the same logic of governance” (p. 44).

The second chapter, “Politics of Representation,” addresses the use of visual materials in the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011 and 2012. During this time, “portraits, pictograms, and slogans competed for the attention of citizens from a multitude of posters, banners, and large-scale prints, collaged throughout the city like a second skin” (p. 126). Since significant portions of Egyptian voters are illiterate, “the usage of election symbols ... is an integral part of the election process in Egypt” (p. 126). These symbols are not neutral, however: “each image triggers a certain story or meaning” (p. 172). In the context of electoral campaigning, a randomly assigned election symbol could affect how voters feel about a candidate. Furthermore, the ways candidates represented themselves were gendered. During the campaign, women candidates presented themselves with degrees of visibility. However, the bodies of these women were mostly absent from campaign posters, effectively preventing women candidates from utilizing body language that would display confidence and power.

The third chapter deals with how January 25 transformed Tahrir Square into a place for the expression of civil dissent and celebration. Civil and artistic agency merged through performative political enactments in the form of artistic creations. Such “newfound power of ownership of one’s space, one’s body, and one’s language” was one of the main accomplishments of the revolution (p. 233). Street art continues to serve “as a democratic model of communication by virtue of allowing the public to actively engage in its script” (p. 233). Like the political scene, graffiti and murals continue to be altered and transformed to reflect current political sensibilities. Later, the chapter addresses the use of systematic sexual violence by counterrevolutionary forces. These acts subsequently made female bodies highly visible on national and international stages—a common occurrence during times of political contestation and war, when “women’s bodies, the notion of chastity, and a discourse of sexual humiliation become focal points of national concern” (p. 251). The former Egyptian regime tried to delegitimize women’s presence in the public spaces of the revolution by equating the protesting female body with prostitution.

This edited volume provides a unique look at the Egyptian revolution by granting agency to activists and describing how art continually serves as a language of contestation. The book, however, lacks a solid theoretical basis that situates this specific case study in the wider literature on social

movements and feminist literature on gender and nationalism. This is particularly true with regard to the discussion of sexual violence that neglects extant literature on the relationship between women and state apparatuses. Sexual violence in Tahrir Square was deeply politically motivated because it targeted protestors in particular spaces at particular times. The volume fails to address how sexual violence against women actually mobilized people to join the revolution by symbolically politicizing women's bodies. Combining visual communication with political and feminist literature on gender, social movements, nationalism, and the state is essential for expanding our understanding of the political processes happening in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt.

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