

The Narrative Aesthetics of Protest Images

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Abstract In this paper I argue that protest images have a certain aesthetics and a degree of transformative power. Crucial to this aesthetics is the images' narrative structure, like the representation of goal-directed actions. On this basis, I show that there are more aspects that contribute to the storytelling capacity, like narrative characteristics and an aesthetics of dramatization. Using the example of climate change protests as a case study, I establish that these aspects can contribute to the transformative ability of protest images, if used effectively.

Keywords Protest images. Transformative. Narrative. Dramatization. Aesthetics.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Message and Aim. – 3 The Different Functions of Protest Images. – 4 Different Narrative Structures and Dramatization. – 4.1 Narratively Engaging Images. – 4.2 Narrative Images. – 4.3 Dramatization. – 5 Aesthetics. – 5.1 Artistic References. – 5.2 Apocalyptic and Dystopian References. – 6 Transformative Power.



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1 Introduction

Protest images have recently received a great deal of attention within various disciplines, especially in visual culture studies, media studies, and the studies of social movements. Two main tendencies within this recent work can be distinguished. On the one hand, scholars regard protest images as a tool with which protests can be mediated. According to this view, protest can be seen as a form of visual dissent (Neumayer, Rossi 2018) or as a performative act (McGarry et al. 2019) and images are helpful for protests because they can make such actions more widely known, for example through the spread of these images on social media. The main interest for these scholars is on the social movements of protest and how they build up momentum (Sadaian 2019). Studies in this vein also consider how images of certain disasters or of protests can lead to political change (Casas, Webb Williams 2019). On the other hand, protest images are seen as a subject worthy of study in their own right. For example, some argue that protest images have a certain aesthetics (Göttke 2020), while others explore how new technologies like smartphones diversify and multiply the kinds of protest images that exist (Neumayer, Stald 2014; Stuart 2013), or how picture-books and movies about historical protests utilize documentary footage and repurpose such events into new forms (Davis-McElligatt 2017; Lyons 2015).

While researchers in the latter strand are merely interested in the aesthetics of protest images, those in the former strand want to study how social movements gain momentum and how protests can lead to social change. But the two approaches are closely connected. I want to combine these two strands and argue that protest images are indeed a crucial factor for social movements and that this is due to their narrative structure and aesthetics of dramatization. I will apply some accounts developed in analytical aesthetics and image theory to show how a protest image – through its content, narrative structure and aesthetics of dramatization – can become an influential tool for social transformation.¹

New technologies and social media can be crucial for protest movements. Such digital devices and platforms are used to mobilize, plan, and communicate (Walgrave et al. 2011; Poell, van Dijck 2017). Nevertheless, it remains contested how influential the digital space is for protests (Christensen, Garfias 2018) and it proves to be difficult to make general claims about the communication of protests *per se*.

¹ A historic example for this might be the images by Charles Moore from the Birmingham Campaign, which were printed in *Life* magazine. The case has been made that these images played a crucial role in the civil rights movement. For three exemplary images and an argument about this case see Johnson 2007.

The communication of protest is complex and different models have been developed to describe it.² Three things seem important: there are different media to communicate a protest *with* (for example linguistic or pictorial); different channels to communicate a protest *through* (newspapers, social media, online spaces, television, direct messages, etc.); and different addressees to communicate a protest *to* (like fellow protesters, sympathizers, adversaries, or the general public). My focus in this paper is on a specific medium a protest can be communicated with: images. While I touch on aspects to whom a protest is communicated to, I won't discuss aspects of different platforms through which protests are communicated.

Most protest images accrue their transformative power through vast distribution on social media and the interest of news media in broadcasting and commenting on these images. But in order to be distributed widely, these images first need to be sufficiently interesting and arresting. And this is mainly achieved through their narrative and dramatizing content and aesthetics. The bandwidth of the distribution and the extent to which they are commented on may nevertheless be the main factor for an image's potential for transformation. But it is not certain whether and how one can separate the power of the image's content from its distribution. As such, it is worth looking at the content specifically to obtain greater clarity about how these images communicate, surprise and engage spectators and evoke emotional responses and tensions.

What is a "protest image"? In this text, I take protest images to be photographs of people demonstrating, striking or using other forms of civil disobedience as a tool of protest. These images are documentary in form and can be made either by people who are not part of the demonstrating group, or by the demonstrators themselves. I take protest images to be in most cases a welcome and intentional act within a group's repertoire of actions, as they can function as a potential multiplier and therefore an effective tool of protest.

A protest image should capture the people demonstrating or their actions. For example, an image that depicts the destruction of a building that was burned down during a protest the previous day would not count as a protest image, in my definition; rather, it would be evidence or a documentary image of the *result* of an event that was a demonstration. A protest image is therefore closely connected to what is intended to be seen by the demonstrators, even though the images themselves might be taken by other people who are not part of the demonstrating group.

² Like ICT based models (Little 2016; Garrett 2006), 'ecological' models (Mercea, Iannelli, Loader 2016) and action-network-models (Bennett, Segerberg 2012).



Figure 1 Stockholm, 2018. Photography © Michael Campanella/The Guardian

Though my account may be applied to most kinds of protests, the specific elements differ with each cause. To this end, here I will focus on climate change protests. My reasoning for doing so is that such protests are frequent and not limited to a single country, making them especially suited to serve as a case study. Moreover, climate protests have achieved one key aspect of transformation: growing their support into a global movement.³

The image on the left of Greta Thunberg in front of the Swedish Parliament [fig. 1] cannot be the sole reason for the whole Fridays for Future movement. Indeed, the movement cannot be reduced to this image. That said, the image led to certain developments, other strikes and demonstrations that in turn were mediatized, which led to still others, and so on. So, it was an important strike and an important image. Why was this image successful? The reason, I argue, at least in part, is that it captured viewers' attention, not only because of the visuals, but also because of the circumstances that are represented. A school strike was a novel event. It was a teenager who struck. The action disrupted the regular order of things and can be seen as a form of civil disobedience. This leads me to one of the theses for which I will argue. In order to be transformative, protest im-

³ As climate protests have become a global movement, it may be worth considering how much they are still a protest, and whether some parts of it might be characterized as civil resistance. Roberts and Ash (2009) understand civil resistance as a politically transformative force alongside other forces.

ages often depict a form of civil disobedience, as this is an effective way of getting attention.

From the millions of protest images of the climate movement, I will pick just some to consider. To a certain extent, this choice is somewhat arbitrary. But I have chosen them to illustrate what I take to be crucial to the transformative aspect from the *content* side, namely that they are narratively engaging and dramatizing. To achieve this dramatization, the images often deploy a dystopian and negative aesthetics and stage interventions in the public sphere.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I consider the goal(s) of protests and argue that there is always a message which strives to trigger a reaction. Second, I highlight three different functions of protest images - documentation, illustration, and a tool of protest - by identifying the latter as the relevant function for a possible transformation, either by growing the protest into a movement (for example, from a national to a global movement) or by influencing the public discourse or even leading to changes in behavior, laws, governance and commerce. Third, I identify several aspects of narrativity and narrative structures that have yet to be analyzed when studying protest images and argue that this narrative complexity, which seeks to dramatize, is essential for images to function as a form of protest. Fourth, I argue that this narrativity and dramatization framework uses a certain aesthetics that is inspired by artworks and movies, and uses dystopian references, performances, and what one could call a negative aesthetics. Finally, I will highlight the ways in which images can add to the transformative power of protest.

2 The Message and Aim

The message of many protests across the political spectrum and for different causes is a voicing of opposition to the status quo, certain behavior or laws. And, ideally, a protest's message puts pressure on and influences public discourse such that it leads to a change from the unwanted situation. The message of climate activists that is conveyed through protest images is around the following lines: there is an urgency to act now, to change behaviors and laws, for if this does not happen, our future will be devastating. The effects of this inaction will be mass species extinction, water pollution, melting ice caps, rising sea levels, people's livelihoods endangered, and an increase in wildfires, droughts, and natural disasters. Additionally, the protests do not just give warnings about and depictions of a certain threatening scenario; they also want to instigate a threat of their own: by no longer playing along. We will not go to school. We will access this prohibited area. We will occupy this bridge. The urgency that motivates the demonstrators is therefore also expressed through this be-



Figure 2 Friday for Future protest. Berlin, 2018. Photography © Jörg Faris, Friday for Future



Figure 3 Friday for Future protest. Berlin, 2019. Photography © Christoph Soeder/dpa

havior. This brings the protest close to a form of resistance and civil disobedience.

Even though certain effects of climate change can already be felt and experienced, and the demand of the climate protests is to change behavior now, the message relates to the future. So, there is a temporal aspect that is important to acknowledge. And the narrative is not only a voicing of opposition, but also a depiction of certain implications if nothing changes. This message is not just communicated with words;⁴ it is brought into public space through acts of protest, and, with the help of protest images, to the people.

The aim of protest (images) is to force governments, organizations, business associations and members of the general public to take a stance, to have them react, and ideally change. An intermediary aim is to gain support for the cause, to influence the public discourse and perhaps to build up an identity for a movement. For this, an ideal situation is to have the images on the news or go viral in order for the message to gain greater exposure. To acquire this attention from the news media, the protest either needs to be big enough, to have some drama (such as violent skirmishes with police or repercussions), or, and this is what I want to focus on in what follows, to be narratively engaging and visually interesting enough to be distributed widely.

3 The Different Functions of Protest Images

Protest images can have at least three functions: they can serve a documentary function, for example when used in a history book; they can serve as an illustration, for example as an illustration of

⁴ Though different groups use words. For example, *Extinction Rebellion* has three messages: Tell the Truth; Act Now; Go Beyond Politics. Other climate movements like Fridays for Future also use words and communicate via social media. Others still provide a complete action plan for the government. As such, words still play a vital part within climate activism. But it is not the only part and not the focus of the present paper.



Figure 4 Friday for Future protest. Berlin, 2018. Photography © Michael Kappeler/dpa

courage against an injustice, or by providing a visual accompaniment to a verbal explanation of a certain topic; or they can serve to amplify a protest, for example by vast distribution via news outlets that gives the event more widespread attention and increases public awareness of the protest. As I am focusing on climate change protests, which are ongoing, I do not want to look at them solely as documentary images nor as illustrations. They are documentary images, but they are not just that. I am mainly interested in them when they are used as tools to reach the goals of voicing dissent, aiming for change in behavior and/or policy, and bringing awareness and new supporters to the cause. In these ways, protest images function as tools of the protest.

As a tool of protest, images of ongoing demonstrations may not seem to be especially differentiated from other parts of protest, such as marching in the street, chanting, holding placards, etc. [figs 2-4]. The images are a form of protest, meaning that the relation to the process, to the actual physical happening, is not the relation of an illustration. And they have a function that exceeds the documentary function, like that of a history book. When one is interested in the power of protest images, the most relevant function is to look at them as tools of protest.

When discussing protest images, it may be useful to differentiate between vehicle, image content and image *sujet* (Pichler, Ubl 2014; Pichler 2018). Some protests use images on and next to protest signs, when marching on the street. They give the protest a sense of visual unity: for example, in the Fridays for Future protests, the image of the earth is a major trope, sweating, crying, burning, sick, standing

in as the letter “o”, as an eye, or other things that are round, etc. The cardboard is the vehicle, the depicted earth the image content, and the climate crisis the image *sujet*. When used at protests, the cardboard images function to give the people marching a certain unity; they serve as a visual message as to why the people are protesting, and as a visual speech act (“the earth is too hot”).⁵

On the other hand, in protest images as I have defined them at the outset, as images of people demonstrating, the photograph is the vehicle, people demonstrating the image content, and the climate crisis the *sujet*. Here the function of these images, when used as tools of protest, can be to amplify the message of the protest through distribution, seeking to gain wider support from the public.

4 Different Narrative Structures and Dramatization

What does the image content need to entail to function as a tool of protest in the best possible way? I argue that an image is ideally suited when it dramatizes the cause of protest, is visually captivating, and has high levels of narrativity. If it does all three of these, the image can be narratively engaging and has a better chance of being distributed widely and thereby putting pressure on organizations, governments and businesses. It may be easier to motivate others to join or support the protest by giving a face to what was previously an abstract cause, and to make this face as convincing and likable as possible to recruit new allies and thereby potentially build up a social movement.

What does narrativity mean in this context? Analytical aesthetics offers some accounts that can be applied to protest images. I will briefly outline these accounts and use them to show that the different narrative structures support protest images in their function as tools of protest.

4.1 Narratively Engaging Images

Bence Nanay (2009) has established an account of what makes an image narratively engaging. He argues that to be narratively engaging, an image needs to represent goal-directed actions. Now, protests are in and of themselves goal-directed actions. People are demonstrating with the aim to change something. The goal is something

⁵ This might be a symbol for this movement. Another symbol can be seen in cardboard signs inspired by Greta Thunberg’s now famous sign with three words [fig. 1]. They seem to have been the model for further protest signs.

along the lines of voicing dissent with something, to trigger debate, to push agendas, to put forward an opposing perspective, and to make hardship and restraints visible. The protest's goals might also be to change the status quo by prompting people to alter their behavior, to pressure lawmakers to change or create certain laws, to compel companies or individuals to change their typical behaviors and practices, or to influence public opinion. This is not to say that everybody who protests against something reflects on all of these features. But many have at least some of these aspects in mind. And images that show protestors at a demonstration are often narratively engaging, even if the exact cause of this specific protest is not known. To be narratively engaging is one reason why protest images can be transformative, because through this attention is secured, a rough idea of what is happening arises, and one might even have some emotional reaction. Narratively engaging images can also provoke curiosity and a desire to know what exactly is going on in the image and why. So, to be narratively engaging is important, but this alone is not enough. Many images, even many documentary images, represent goal-directed actions in a form akin to someone jumping from a springboard into a swimming pool. And while these images are also narratively engaging, insofar as they provide a starting point for an explanation, can capture the attention of a spectator, and offer an idea of what was happening when the image was shot, their ability to narratively engage alone is not enough to explain the transformative power of protest images.

4.2 Narrative Images

An account on narrative images maintains that in order to be narrative, an image needs to represent goal-directed actions, as in Nanay's account, or to represent five characteristics, like two events that are connected through a unifying subject and bridging connections, the representation of time passing, and to have someone in the picture display intentions (Fasnacht 2021). If these narrative characteristics can be detected, the image is capable of autonomously telling a story that can be understood by different people without background knowledge. With this account, one might call protest images in general *narrative* images, because all five characteristics are fulfilled: one event as the cause of protest that is indicated; the other event as people protesting that is depicted. These events are connected through the unifying subject (demonstrator or the cause of protest), bridging connections (a causal relation), the passage of time and the display of intentions by the demonstrators, for example to voice dissent or to change the circumstances that causes them to protest in the first place. But many protest images are narrative in this clas-



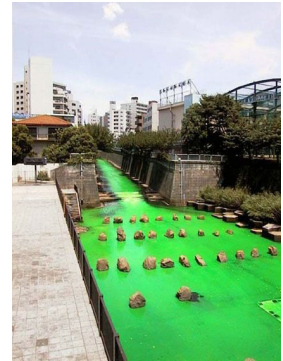
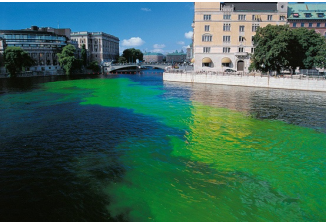
Figure 5 Climate protest in Lugano, 2020. Photography © CdT Archive

sical documentary sense, and not all these images have transformative power. Thus, more must be needed to make a narrative image transformative.

4.3 Dramatization

I argue that dramatization plays a crucial role in allowing these narrative images to have some transformative power. Dramatization can be understood either in a documentary way, or in a performative way of storytelling. I will sketch both quickly. Dramatic documentary protest images are those in which there is some sort of conflict or violence depicted, for example a violent arrest, the teargassing of protesters, or demonstrators burning or throwing something. These images score high in narrativity,⁶ and are images that tend to be photographed, printed, and shared widely. They are narratively engaging and capture the viewer's attention. Another form of dramatization is when protesters are staging a performance. Then they highlight something that is central to the cause of protest and they capture it pictorially. In climate change protests, one way to do this is to take a possible situation in the future and act it out in a way that dramatizes it, for example by staging a "die-in" in reference to a possible future mass extinction of some species. These images are also high in

⁶ Marie Laure Ryan argues that images can have different degrees of narrativity (Ryan 2014). Images that depict some sort of conflict, obstacles or violence may therefore in general be higher in narrativity than images that do not.



Figures 6-7 Climate protest by "Extinction Rebellion" in Zurich, 2019

Figures 8-10 "Green river". Interventions by the artist Olafur Eliasson in 1998. Images: <https://olafureliasson.net/archive/artwork/WEK101541/green-river>

narrativity, but not just on account of the documentary form, where they could be described as someone lying on the floor, but also because of the story that is told through them. They might be spectacular to look at as well, but the intention with these protest images is to tell, or rather show a possible future scenario by dramatizing it, as in the example above [fig. 5].

In this way, some of the most persuasive protest images are arguably not necessarily the ones that represent goal-directed actions in a documentary sense. Rather, they are ones that use the whole field of narrative possibilities to tell, dramatize, and show the problem that is causing people to protest. In climate change protests, these are possible future scenarios. These are images where the message can only be understood through background information and context. Therefore, even though they are captivating and narratively engaging, they force the onlooker to inform themselves so as to fully understand what is depicted.

5 Aesthetics

Protest images generally have a certain content that leads to them having a certain aesthetics that is perpetuated again and again. They often have the following elements: protest signs; people in public spaces (often many people, but not always); people shouting; messages on cardboard signs, which are either shouted or visually represented. These images shape our understanding of what protests look like and make them in general easily recognizable as images of protest. One could call these prototypical protest images.

But there are also other protest images, like the ones that dramatize in the performative way. They do not have the typical aesthetic content of people marching in the street with cardboard signs, but instead show unusual interventions that act out a possible future scenario. To further strengthen this dramatization, climate change activists often use an aesthetics that resembles artworks or dystopian and apocalyptic movies. I will consider three examples to illustrate this point.

5.1 Artistic References

At first glance, the images on the first row [figs 6-7] do not really differ from the images in the row below [figs 8-10]. But the first images document an intervention by climate activists, while the latter are images of artistic interventions by the artist Olafur Eliasson some years before.

I would call the former protest images, even though they are certainly not typical ones. What they show is the importance of background information to categorize them as images of protest. In their aesthetics alone, they are no different from the latter.

Figure 7 has some narrative structure, but with a message that requires interpretation. It is not a picture of someone holding a sign with “pesticides are dangerous”; rather, it dramatizes a certain ecological danger, like pesticides or contaminated water, by staging a performative act that dramatizes and shows this danger via visual means. It makes something visible that in general goes unnoticed or does not receive much attention. And this dramatizing aesthetics is delivered through an extreme color that is guaranteed to grab viewers’ attention. Now the protest image needs to trigger some reflection and narrative understanding on the part of the spectator. If they think, “ah, nice, green rivers are beautiful”, then the images were not successful in their function as tools of protest. But as soon as reflection on, and maybe a sense of curiosity about, the activists’ motivation begins, the images’ function as a tool of protest can be seen to have succeeded.



Figure 11 Extinction Rebellion protest in London, 2020. Photography © Jeremy Selwyn, Evening Standard/Redux

Figure 12 Extinction Rebellion protest in London, 2020. Photography © Steve Bell, Camera Press/Redux

5.2 Apocalyptic and Dystopian References

Some protest images use apocalyptic references as their dramatizing element. They portray interventions and performances, for example in so-called “die-ins”. They use performances to highlight the possible extinction of certain species as a result of climate change. These images can again be understood narratively as showing a possible future through an act of protest with a performative element. They function as tools of protest through taking one element, concretizing it and performing it in a way that disrupts and intervenes in open spaces. This secures them attention, and the narrative and dramatizing aesthetics may be at least part of the reason for that.



Figures 13-14 "Ende Gelände" protest against coal mining. Germany, 2019

Figures 15-16 Stills from the movie *The Island* (2005)

Dystopian places, landscapes and apocalyptic narratives are familiar from aesthetics in art and movies.⁷ Some protest images deploy a similar aesthetics. Through this aesthetics, protest images may trigger (perhaps unconsciously) comparisons with these kinds of films.

In the examples above [figs 13-14], demonstrators of *Ende Gelände* protest the use of coal in hazmat suits and amid barren landscapes. Now the image understood documentarily shows people trying to disrupt the coalmining. But the aesthetics they used resemble those of dystopian movies that show uninhabitable landscapes, like in the examples above [figs 15-16]. This is further dramatized by the use of the hazmat suits.

One needs to gain attention if one wants the protest image to be effective. One way to do this is to use visuals that are extraordinary and capable of capturing the viewers' attention, visuals that are engaging and at the same time evoke particular associations and imaginations. A typical way for climate activists to do this is to stage performance-like interventions of a possible or probable future by using a certain

⁷ See Brady (2021, 16) for further ideas on how a future aesthetics of nature in the wake of climate change can be imagined with the help of negative aesthetics and apocalyptic narratives from movies and literature.

aesthetics that is culturally familiar from art, movies and literature. There is a rich common knowledge of visuals related to apocalyptic or negative environmental aesthetics. These are gleaned from fiction and documentary images. References to such visuals are likely to boost the aesthetics and argumentative power of protest images. These performative protests can also be compared to what are sometimes called “image events”, that is, “deliberately staged spectacles” planned by social movements that aim to gain mass media attention (Johnson 2007, 3).

The protest march wants to act like an image; it intends to be photographed. The interventions above stage a photogenic image; besides the desired disruptive effect, the whole performance is intended to attract attention and be pictorially reproduced. And this is achieved with an aesthetics that is widely known and recognizable from visual culture.

6 Transformative Power

So far, I have argued that the power of protest images comes from their function as a tool of protest, which is achieved through a narrative structure and an aesthetics of dramatization. Through this they have some transformative potential, both inside and outside the movement. Inside, they can help with identity- and movement-building, and in growing and gaining influence through visibility. Outside, they can train the gaze, shape the public discourse and potentially lead to actual changes, be it in law, behavior, or practices.

By way of conclusion, I will briefly restate the key features that I associate with the transformative power of protest images. One aspect is to transform the gaze, the focus, the attention. This is a visual aspect that is best achieved through pictorial means. Through dystopian aesthetics, the dramatization in pictures, the image directs the attention of people to such circumstances in their everyday lives. The protest image can also be transformative insofar as it trains the spectator to see similar aesthetics or problems in places where one might have previously overlooked them. An important aspect of this is the dramatization and use of a specific aspect and turning it into a visual symbol for a far bigger issue that cannot be explained through a single image. Through this symbolization, one might find an entry into a topic that might otherwise seem overwhelming or “not one’s problem”.⁸

⁸ Regener, Safaian and Teune (2020) have argued that symbols are visual condensations of the key message of a protest movement. Through the spread of this symbol, not only is visibility achieved, but also the symbol might change its meaning. They exemplify this with the symbol of the rainbow flag.

Shaping and influencing the public discourse is a further potential transformative power. If the protest images are in some way spectacular – for example they show large masses of people, they show some kind of conflict, are otherwise disruptive or aesthetically interesting – then they have a higher chance of being printed in newspapers, shown on television, shared on social media, and so on. If there are protest images that show repercussions against those protesting, this usually has a multiplying effect not only in terms of the image’s circulation, but also in bringing new active supporters to the next protest of its kind.⁹ Many protest movements have some kind of clear demands, and these demands have a higher chance of being read, shared and discussed if there is an image that is worth printing alongside them.

But the main aim in transformation is a real-world change in the kind of behavior, laws, and mechanisms that cause the problem one is protesting against. Protests and protest images can expedite such developments. In slow, democratic mechanisms, they might be used to push for changes and/or compress the timeframe in which this progress is achieved. Whether and to what degree this is statistically successful is another question, and this is not my concern here since it would require extensive empirical investigation. But there is certainly evidence of certain protests being able to generate sympathy, to gain passive and active supporters, to grow a protest into a movement, and to change public opinion and put pressure on policymakers, businesses, individuals and society at large.

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⁹ Especially if the response is perceived as unjust and disproportionate, for example if there is a violent repercussion against a peaceful protest. But this is, of course, context- and country-specific. The response might also be so strong that it curbs the motivation to protest. Or the opposite.

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