Image-sharing and iconicity on social media during the Catalan conflict (2017)

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the role that images have played in the Catalan conflict using the pictures produced in the days surrounding the independence referendum in Barcelona as a case study. As part of an ongoing research agenda on the role of images in social media, our goal is to develop a framework for the analysis of visual practices on social media in the course of creating and re-signifying images. The pictures analysed were taken in the Ramon Llull Primary School during the days of 1 October 2017 and 3 October 2017.

Keywords

social media

iconicity

activism

Catalan independence movement

Visual social media

Digital culture

Visual culture

Iconic images

1. Introduction: Visual social media research, politics and activism

Social movements in the twenty-first century cannot be understood without digital technologies. As a result, there is a growing academic interest in the importance of digital media for the organization (Postill 2018) and articulation of protests, as well as their techno-political imaginaries (Treré et al. 2017), although the majority of studies have focused mainly on the textual use of social media (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2011). This can be partly explained by the prevalence of the so-called Digital Methods (Rogers 2013) that have privileged the extraction of datasets emphasizing textual and quantitative analysis. The second possible explanation is the logo-centric nature of image production that is usually circumscribed to local contexts (Doerr and Teune 2012). This constitutes a limitation, since a growing number of social media practices are visual and cannot be analysed using automatic tools. Thus, while there is an emergent body of academic work paying attention to the role of visual elements in social movements, public protests and political activism (Kuntsman 2017; Aziz 2017; Gürsel 2017; Neumayer and Rossi 2018; McGarry et al. 2019; Vis et al. 2013; Mirzoeff 2018), there is still a need to develop critical analytic frameworks that can deal with the predominantly qualitative and interpretative nature of images.

The way in which political events and public demonstrations are visualized is relevant, not only because we live in a world saturated with images, but also because these images can determine what can be visually represented, creating zones of visibility and invisibility. In this context, media professionals and photojournalists increasingly compete and converge with citizens involved in image dissemination in digital networks (Mortensen 2017). Subsequently, images in social media can potentially become a way to dialogue, expand or challenge official visual

representations of events, usually controlled and shaped by those in power. At the same time, they could generate a sense of identity and belonging to those involved in the event, creating a collective visualization.

2. Images and social media in the Catalan conflict

The Catalan conflict has had an extensive diffusion in media at international level. According to Pont Sorribes and Perales-Garcia the press coverage was especially intense in European countries such as Italy, United Kingdom, Germany and France (2018: 117). In this regard, social media have also played a capital role: Twitter has been crucial in keeping the momentum and Instagram has created resonance due to the constant sharing of images related to the events occurring in Catalonia in the past few years. As a political movement, the Catalan process shares some common elements with other movements in terms of how social media has been used: for example, the demonstration of a collective force and unity, the definition of visual tropes/branding, and the *virality* of certain images. We will describe these features briefly before we focus on the next section where we will discuss iconicity, a methodological concept that is at the base of our proposed framework.

2.1 Collective enactment

Some of the most widely spread images of the Catalan process are those of crowds participating in demonstrations. Images of people in protests indicate the extent of people's support to the movement, signalling the power of the people. By displaying multitudes taking part in the organized activities, the efficacy and the belief in the movement's potential for success increases (Kharroub and Bas 2016: 1979, Gómez Cruz and San Cornelio 2018: 53). In this regard, Catalan

demonstrations during the National Day (11 September) since 2011, were articulated and visually curated as performances through the collective creation of symbols by crowds. The resulting images were mainly produced by legacy media, especially the Catalan public broadcaster (TV3) that made a special coverage of these events. Then, the images were shared by common people in their social media accounts, thus creating a constant flow of professionally made photos that were re-appropriated as vernacular ones.

2.2 Visual tropes

Academic research on the visual elements of social movements has focused on identities and the construction of visual icons (Mattoni and Doerr 2007: 131). The creation and consistency in the use of visual cues could be seen in multiple examples, from the use of green in the Arab spring to the umbrellas in Hong Kong or the yellow vests in Paris. According to Sawer (2007), colours are a visual source of orientation distinguishing those inside the group and those outside of it. In the case of the Catalan process, different visual elements have been deployed as part of the merchandising produced by pro-independence associations such as Assemblea Nacional de Catalunya (ANC) or Omnium: T-shirts to be worn on the Catalan National Day or objects used for the celebratory events. In terms of colours, yellow laces appeared after 1 October (as a consequence of the imprisonment of political leaders) in the last stage of the Catalan process in 2017. Recently, yellow has been adopted as a signifier of the solidarity with the prisoners related with this cause.

2.3 Multivalent images

The images produced during demonstrations are used with different intentions by both supporters and detractors of a cause. For instance, images related to police action could potentially mobilize an emotional response, whether it is empathy, discomfort or rage. Otherwise, these images serve as a documentary proof of what happened, since they afford activists to share incidents of police brutality and injustices (Kharroub and Bas 2016: 1975) to be hypothetically shown in future trials. Moreover, these controversial images open the conditions to turn them into viral images on social media, because, according to Poell and van Dijck (2015) the effect of algorithms favours images that are spectacular and depict violence, thus increasing their visibility.

3. Iconicity: The case of images surrounding the Ramon Llull school

The previous characterization of the images of the Catalan process has been built as part of a wider research agenda on the role images in social media. This plan initiated in the context of a funded research project on personal narratives on Instagram[1] in which we developed a mixed method approach[2] to analyse content and interactions of users, narratives and images. As a follow-up to this research, we shifted our interest to political uses of networked images (Gómez Cruz and San Cornelio 2018). The current investigation focuses on the prominent role of images in the Catalan process using the notion of iconicity as a complementary approach to our previous work. Thus, iconicity is a conceptual work-in-progress that we have found useful as a framework to think about and analyse images during specific events, considering images not as mere representations, but as a part of a lively and collective process of meaning-making. In this sense, we understand iconicity as both an action and a way to study that action from a historical, political, cultural, technical and visual point of view.

In a classical semiotics approach, iconicity is the relationship between a sign and its object (often a linguistic pattern or another sign), in which the form of the sign recapitulates the object in some way (Eco 2003). Nevertheless, we are using the term locating image-making processes within a broader socio-technical and political context. While we find the semiotic aspects – such as the distinction between denotation and connotation present in signs – useful, we move forward locating images within a digital culture approach that studies them as material visual practices (Lehmuskallio and Gómez Cruz 2016).

In a similar vein, Hariman and Lucaites define the iconic as an aesthetically conventional image featuring a recognizable subject in a way that emphasize conflicts of the society performatively and emotively (2007: 30–37). According to Drainville (2018), this definition of iconic resonates with Barthes' *punctum*, in terms of the poignancy that affects the viewer beyond the basic cultural appreciation of the photograph (Barthes 1981 26–28). In this sense, recent research on iconicity of images in conflicts has devoted much attention to the case of the Alan Kurdi picture (Vis and Goriunova 2015; Drainville 2015; Prøitz 2018), not only due to its emotionality but also regarding the moral implications of representing and sharing images of vulnerable subjects, like refugee children. Thus, social media users also shape iconicity, by sharing and commenting on images, activating 'retweets', 'trending' and the 'likes', as new markers of iconic impact (Mortensen et al. 2017: 74).

Methodologically speaking, iconographic analysis has been brought back applied to social media images (see Mattoni and Doerr 2007) even though most studies do not connect to the broader qualities of images through time (Drainville 2018: 117). According to Drainville, the research on

iconicity in social media is divided into two types: those who investigate a resonant or iconic image, along with its subsequent permutations (Boudana et al. 2017); and those whose research concentrates upon variations of pictures or picture types and not upon some important starting point (Shifman 2014). Conversely, Drainville (2018) argues that classic iconographic methods can contribute a richer understanding to imagery shared on the Internet. He draws on Panofsky's, method (1979) for examining, categorizing and interpreting imagery, that is divided it into three parts: (1) pre-iconographic description: identifying the components in a picture, (2) iconographical analysis: identifying symbolic elements such as personifications, allegories, symbols, attributes and emblems, (3) iconological interpretation: synthesizing the materials collected from the iconographical analysis with knowledge of the period in which the picture was created.

3.1 Method and sample

Considering the previous framework, the images of the Ramon Llull School could be an exponent of the different layers of meaning that images put into play. This school became a hot spot during several days between 1 and 3 October 2017 in Barcelona because of the events happening during the police intervention and consequently was highly present in the media. The images of the selected sample were produced in the surroundings of the Ramon Llull School during these days. We studied this set of images using the basic foundations of the iconographic method (using Drainville's revision of Panofsky) and semiotics, starting with a more descriptive–denotative analysis and an interpretation of the context-connotative, including social appropriations of the images.

On referendum day (1 October 2017) we collected images related to the school from different social media (WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram). Then, on 3 October, participant observation was undertaken *in situ* during the demonstration that took place in the Ramon Llull school. The research question that guided our data gathering focused on the articulation of images related to the independence process and their connection with the image of the school. The sample of images analysed in this article included a selection of pictures posted on Instagram, since we had previous experience in data collection in this platform (Figures 1, 2, 4, 5,7), from a hashtag-based search including #1Octubre, #1O, #catalanreferendum and some pro-independence accounts such as @assemblea. We also included images taken during the participant observation (Figures 3 and 6).

3.2 The school as a symbol and character

Ramon Llull is a public primary school located in the Eixample district in Barcelona, very near to the Sagrada Familia church. As the famous Gaudi building, the Ramon Llull School is an iconic modernist building finished in 1931 during Spain's republican period. The democratic principles of education as a means for society to achieve progress and equal rights, guided its design. Nowadays, multiculturalism and inclusiveness are part of the school's identity.

As a voting site for the 1-O Referendum, this school was put under the spotlight because some violent incidents took place inside and outside the building. The reasons why the Spanish police and the media decided to be at this particular school early in the morning are out of the scope of this article, but the fact is that the images of what happened in the school were spread all around

the world. One image was particularly disseminated both on mainstream media and social media: a crowd in front of the Spanish police who were surrounding the school (Figure 1). In Figure 1 (published originally in the Catalan newspaper ARA[3]), the building is not depicted in the picture, just the people in front of the main door. The perspective of the photograph, taken from a vantage point, allows for a glimpse behind the trees that enclose the facilities and see a small part of the playground. The *zenital* point of view in photography and film could be read through the lens of Certeau's figure of *voyeur* as someone gazing at the city from above, as a whole, graspable image, in contrast with the messy city that one moves through down below (San Cornelio 2008: 213). In this regard, this picture shows a very geometrical and static layout, contrasting with the tension that is being experienced.

Figures 1and 2

Two days after the referendum, a strike and a demonstration were scheduled in different parts of Barcelona: one of the meeting points was the Ramon Llull school. Consequently, a number of people gathered early in the morning there in order to march against the violence during voting day. Figure 2 (recovered from the Instagram account @assemblea) was taken from a very similar perspective to that shot on 1 October, reproducing the idea of a multitudinous event arithmetically composed, and including a sentence painted on the pavement: 'We are a worthy people'. In this second picture the building (the right pavilion of the school) is included in the frame, achieving a greater monumentality. This effect is fulfilled by technical means, forcing the perspective with the use of a wide-angle lens (this can be noticed since all the vertical lines of the buildings are distorted).

Both shots are formally very similar, but whereas in the former the essential content is the crowd (one third of the layout is people), in the latter there is an intention to include the building as part of the narrative since it represents almost half of the composition; the people and the message of dignity occupy the lower space of the frame. This way, it could be interpreted that the crowd reinforces the building's presence and vice versa: the building becomes a character, an entity.

Some authors have pointed to the importance of images in presenting symbols that can establish quick references and appeal to a broad audience beyond abstract and complex ideologies (Kharroub and Bas 2016: 1987). Similarly, Alexander contends that icons act as symbolic condensations that root social meanings in a material form (2010: 10). The interesting thing in this case is how this school, as an entity, enters the pro-independence narrative, taking on a monumental and symbolic role.

3.3 Healing rituals and re-iconization

On the morning of 3 October, before the demonstration depicted in Figure 2, the Ramon Llull primary school's main entrance was full of flowers and drawings. Our first impression was that they spontaneously emulated the altars improvised at the Ramblas in Barcelona after the terrorist attacks that took place there merely weeks before the referendum. Messages and personal objects were pinned on the fences and walls of the entrance with the aim of 'healing' the harm produced two days before. The recognition of pain was not only addressed to the people but also to the school building and to what it represents as an educational institution. Consequently, some

images (Figures 3 and 4) do capture this idea, since many frames of these altars include visual references to the building.

Figures 3 and 4

According to our observations on site that day, there is a repetition of visual tropes that are aligned with some other collective rituals after disasters or acts of violence. This was confirmed by analysing the hashtag #escolaramonllull on Instagram, where a number of pictures of the fences are still available (Figures 4 and 5). As represented through the pictures, this was a highly mediated act, and emotions mobilized different visual practices on social media such as selfies or pictures taken in front of these altars (Figure 6) and memes (Figure 7) that were created in order to express the events on 1 October in a symbolic way, with the building as a backdrop of the toys. These visual practices could be compared to other controversial situations of image production that have been studied in recent years (Meese et al. 2015) and that confirm the importance of images, in this case, not only of the building, but also of the different elements that reminded the facts of 1 October.

Figures 6 and 7

4. Conclusions and further work

With this brief case study, we wanted to contribute to outline some relevant aspects to enquire images in political conflicts, using the Catalan process as a case study. Considering the

framework of iconicity that we explore in this article, it is worth noting that the Ramon Llull School building was already an icon in Barcelona, mainly because of its architectural style. Nevertheless, the events produced in the first days of October 2017 have fostered a process of re-iconization of the building, due to the images of the Catalan referendum spread in the media. The presence of the building in the pictures allows for an immediate connection to the referendum, and, on the other hand, those events constitute a new layer of meaning superimposed to that of the school, linking it to the Catalan process, both for independence supporters and for detractors. As an example, some days after the referendum, fascist messages (including a swastika) appeared on one of the school's main walls, and, as a response to this, the next day there were pro-independence messages painted on the floor outside the entrance. Hence, these (sometimes conflicting) connotations, that operate in the symbolic realm, have affected the school's normal activity. These meanings connect the past to the imagined future, contributing to the imaginaries of the conflict.

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Notes

1 www.selfiestories.net.

2 This mixed method, due to restrictions of the Instagram API access, can currently not be carried out anymore.

3 https://www.ara.cat/politica/Setge-Ramon-Llull-resistencia-pacifica_0_1879612221.html.