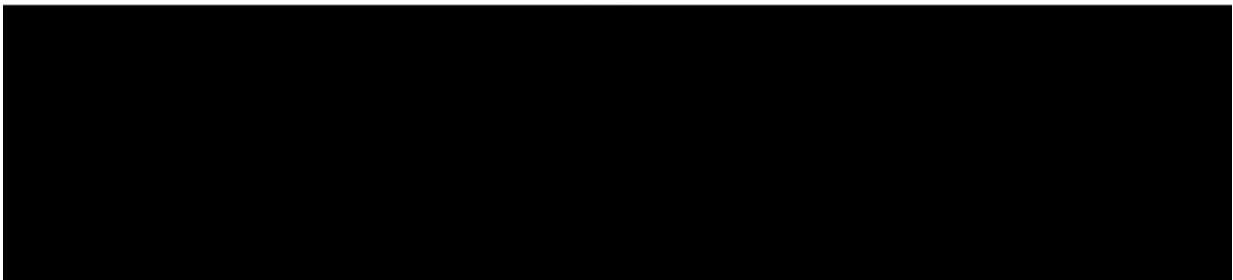


Analysing graffiti helps to understand the Egyptian uprising of 2011

November 8 2018, by Johanna Hillgren



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How are the protesters who were killed in connection with the Egyptian uprising of 2011 depicted? A thesis in religious studies has shown that an analysis of the cultural production surrounding the 2011 protests in

Cairo and their aftermath—which included graffiti and murals—can assist in the understanding of the uprising.

In her thesis, Giulia Giubergia analysed the cultural output in the form of graffiti, official monuments and the anniversary celebrations in remembrance of the protesters who died during the confrontation with the police and the military in public places in downtown Cairo following the uprising in 2011.

"Through examining this kind of material, you can shed light on the multifaceted and at times conflicting narratives about the uprising that were produced and reproduced on the walls, streets and squares of downtown Cairo," says Giulia Giubergia.

Studies in the field of cultural sociology of religion, like this thesis, are not common within [religious studies](#) research. They are aimed at investigating how the boundary between the sacred and the profane is drawn in various sociocultural contexts, and in this thesis, the concept of 'the sacred' is used to analyse and understand the struggle over the symbolic meaning of the uprising in Cairo.

The thesis describes Cairo's development and its downtown quarter, in particular Tahrir Square, Mohammad Mahmoud Street, and Youssef al-Gendy Street.

Portrayed martyrs

Giulia Giubergia analyses how people who died during the anti-government demonstrations have been portrayed and represented on Cairo's walls. Victims such as Belal Ali Gaber are represented as angels—symbols of innocence—and incorporated into a wider martyrological narrative.

The martyrological narrative, which refers to the people who died as innocent victims of the uprising, is not typical for Sunni Muslim narratives of martyrdom, which more often present martyrs as active campaigners who take up arms and fight for the integrity of the community and in defence of the faith.

Through the analysis of a variety of graffiti and murals that have been repainted and modified several times, it is possible to highlight the changes that occurred in the political climate in Egypt between the beginning and end of 2012. The changes in the visual presentation of the martyrs reflects a broader political shift in the country, according to Giulia Giubergia.

"The comparison between Port Said's martyrs—depicted as alive, smiling and with colourful angel wings—and a later portrait of four other dead martyrs with bloody, swollen faces and dark, almost unrecognisable wings, is telling. The graffiti depicting the dead, disfigured martyrs was painted in November 2012 when the presidential election was just around the corner. The use of brutal, explicit images of death is a way of invoking a feeling of responsibility and guilt for being passive in the face of violence and failing to defend the sacred values for which the martyrs died—in passers-by as well as in the broader audience who view the painting on social media and in journalism reports.

Feminist agenda

Giulia Giubergia also looks at graffiti produced by Women on Walls, a group whose graffiti highlights a feminist agenda on Cairo's streets, and also explores the dispute over who has permission to paint murals on the streets of Cairo and thereby to preserve the memory of the uprising, in particular at sites which are seen as sacred.

Another thing that is analysed in the thesis is the construction and the

destruction of a monument to the martyrs in Tahrir Square.

"It enables a very concrete analysis of how collective memories are not always shared by all or unequivocal, but instead may be beset by disputes and conflicts. The analysis of Tahrir Square also reveals the symbolic significance that the occupation of state-dominated sites has for groups in subordinate positions in a society—in this case the protesters. The re-taking of the Square as an open space for all to use has had consequences for how the uprising is depicted, even if Tahrir Square has returned to being a state-dominated site since 2014," says Giulia Giubergia.

By combining analyses of images, symbols, narratives, memories and sites, this thesis has aimed to show how the positions of various collectives are delineated and challenged in connection with a period of social unrest, transformation and re-examination.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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