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Gezi's Many Women in Red: A genealogy of an icon from street to stage

PIETER VERSTRAETE

It is a fairly simple, red cotton dress, evenly cut around the neck, with a tea-length that reached just below her knees. She is armed solely with a white tote bag hanging harmlessly from her shoulder. Her gaze points down and away, protecting her eyes from the undue spurt of pepper spray that an anti-riot police officer targets towards her from a mere foot away.¹ Her name is Ceyda Sungur and she was a research assistant in Urban and Regional Planning of Istanbul Technical University at the time (Sen 2013). The place is Gezi Park, which directly neighbours Turkey's Taksim Square in Istanbul's busiest commercial leisure and tourist district, Beyoğlu; the date is 29 May 2013. The Park has just been occupied by a dozen of concerned citizens, including artists and activists, as a trumped-up urban development plan was to demolish its little more than six hundred sycamore trees, and with that, one of the last remaining green spaces in downtown Istanbul.² Like many other young people, Sungur arrived at the scene to protest (Ming 2013). No doubt, she too was outraged by the nascent demolition and came to be part of the non-violent, legitimized collective occupation in Gezi Park. Yet her identity was stripped away the moment her image was snapped by Reuters photographer Osman Orsal, who sent it purposefully into the world. Perhaps he too was captured by that red dress, but that day, the silhouette of Sungur instantly became the first meme of the Gezi Park uprising: the lady, or better, woman, in red (dress) (*Kırmızılı Kadın*), instigating endless streams of images and artistic variations. It is this genealogy of images or 'effigies' of Gezi's woman in red working performatively to address different audiences that this essay proposes to discuss in order to reveal how, as a deliberate aesthetic strategy, the refunctioning of the image extends dramaturgies of social protest that were already innately



theatrical to spectators of the uprising while resisting encapsulation in aesthetic regimes of subsequent artistic representations.

■ Figure 1. Detail of the first photograph taken by Reuters reporter Osman Orsal on 28 May 2013 at 12:30 in Gezi Park. Photo © Osman Orsal

The Gezi Park uprising, which began on 28 May 2013 and lasted until mid-July of that same summer, originally contested the urban development plans for the area around Taksim Square, a project that then-Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan personally promoted. Due to the daily disproportionate crackdowns and excessive use of force by the riot police, the environmentally inspired sit-ins and occupations of the park sparked nationwide protests all over Turkey. This was the biggest challenge in the (to date) nineteen years of rule of Erdoğan's conservative Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, further referred to in this article as AKP). Besides the anti-capitalist environmentalist concerns against the privatization of public parks and public spaces, the Gezi Resistance, also known as the Occupy Gezi Movement, concerned a

¹ I want to thank my partner, Dr Görkem Akgöz, for these lines as well as her overall critical support of this article.

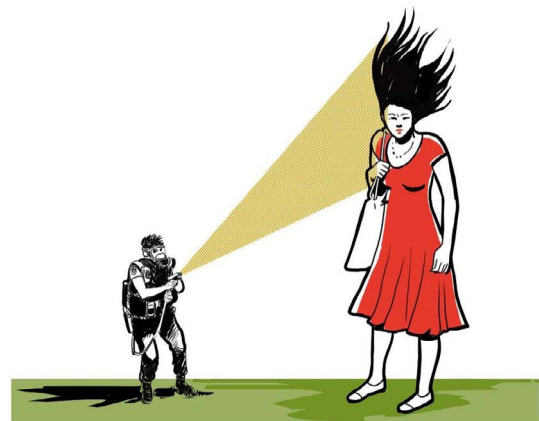
² The park was planned to be demolished to make place for the reconstruction of the historical Halil Pasha Artillery Barracks (built in 1806 on what was then an Armenian cemetery, and demolished in 1940).

wide range of related issues, including the political Islamists' agenda in the AKP-majority government eroding Turkey's secularism, democracy, freedom of press, expression and assembly. Today, after the failed coup on 15 July 2016, for which the US-based Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen is blamed, the official state narrative is that the Gezi Park protests were instigated by police officers who belonged to the Gülen movement. This complicates any commemoration of the uprising as it is now retold as an illegal coup attempt. Since civic space in Turkey is under constant pressure, the circulation of images of protest plays an important role in performing memory, while history is continually reinvented by state officials and the state-controlled media. As such, it is of the utmost importance to archive protest images, and trace their genealogy and functioning as part of a longer-lasting cultural resistance that was already incipient for some time before the Gezi uprising (Topal 2017).

It is also important to realize that the woman in red phenomenon is part of a wider repertoire of performative forms of protest that has changed Turkey's protest culture and cultural scene irrefutably (Verstraete 2019). Never before did we see in Turkey's streets and social media such organic entanglements of performative forms of protest and creative activism to call for instantaneous attention regarding the state of democracy, ecology, public space as well as gender and LGBTQ+ rights. But it all started with that one image of a young woman standing casually in her red dress while finding herself in the line of fire. In an article in *The Guardian*, a Turkish student is quoted as saying: 'That photo encapsulates the essence of this protest ... The violence of the police against peaceful protesters, people just trying to protect themselves and what they value' (Williams 2013).

Soon after the Reuters image was disseminated, it went viral on Facebook, Twitter and other social media. Many versions followed, starting chronologically with a cartoon icon that was imitated in many other cartoons, then quickly turned into graffiti, posters, stickers, pins, magazine covers, and even a billboard in Izmir, designed by students at Dokuz Eylül University, where one could poke one's head

through the face and pose for pictures (Harding 2013; Shaw 2014 [2013]). The pose was also re-enacted by many people inside and outside Turkey in solidarity with Gezi; it produced a kinaesthetic imagination (Roach 1996) as protestors not only re-posted the images digitally on social media with accompanying narratives, but also started to 'embody' them by wearing red garments at the protests as a marker of new political identities (Yılmaz 2018: 73).³ In a second tier of remediations, the image was picked up by theatre and performance artists like dancer Gonca Gümüşayak who, through nightly improvisations at Gezi Park as a guerrilla theatre tactic, came to embody the woman in red in her street performance, *Liquid Politics (Likit Politika)* (2013–16). It subsequently inspired the theatre stage with a first appearance in the musical play, *Taksim Square/Taksim Meydani* (2013) by Talimhane Tiyatrosu and Neuköllner Oper, which played both in Berlin and Istanbul. As I will explain, a prior unassuming appearance of a woman dressed in red in the contested production of *Mi Minör* (2012–13) at Istanbul's KüçükÇiftlik Park somewhat complicates the genealogy while aiding the phenomenon in ideological terms. Subsequent appearances that I will discuss here are *Taksim Forever–Rüyalar parkı/Park der Träume* (2014) at the Neuköllner Oper, and *Last Park Standing (DSE)* (2019) at Schauspiel Stuttgart.



In order to appraise the significance of the many different iterations of the 'woman in red' from the street to the stage, I am inspired by Joseph Roach's notion of a genealogy of

³ One such narrative accompanied a variation of the icon where the woman appeared much bigger than the policeman, stating: 'The more you spray the bigger we get.'

■ Figure 2. The original woman in red (dress) icon based on Osman Orsal's photo. Artwork © Murat Başol

performative effigies (1996). Central to my argument is that throughout the transfigurations and remediations of the woman in red image, different audiences are affectively addressed as 'publics' (Fraser 1990) and are calling for a sustained transnational 'agonistic solidarity' (Arendt 1998 [1958]; Chouliaraki 2011) with what was at stake at Gezi. As such, I argue against simplistic renunciations of the intertwining of political and artistic activism, such as that suggested by Lieven de Cauter in his fourteen 'Theses on art and activism' (2013), published at about the same time as the Gezi protests were in full swing.

A PERFORMATIVE GENEALOGY OF AN ICON

Although protests like the Gezi Park uprising could come across as a series of isolated moments of indignation with an obscure(d) linearity, in hindsight, we can look at them in terms of a genealogy in the way that Joseph Roach has proposed in *Cities of the Dead* (1996). Roach's idea that the city functions as a 'vortex of performances' implies that we should embrace knowledge production through the public square, the street and the theatre as equal to learning from books and inspires us to look at 'the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices through collective representations' (Roach 1996: 25), which a performance genealogy would typically document. It is inspired by Jonathan Arac's concept of 'critical genealogy' that excavates the past for 'conceiving alternatives for our present condition' (ibid.) and its function is to attend to 'counter-memories' through paying attention to how memory is both discursively and bodily transmitted (26).

In order to understand the series of Gezi's woman in red images as both theatrical and socio-political interventions, I am inspired by Roach's genealogies of performance, which I will develop further for my claims on (re) mediated protest, yet I will not fully adopt his way of analysis through the three principles of kinaesthetic imagination, vortices of behaviour and displaced transmission. Rather, I am focusing on Roach's central concept of the effigy,

to explain the transformation of the woman in red from a photograph refunctioned through reimagined digital versions to re-embodiments in protest and performance, all as part of the interconnected webs of materials, photographs, texts and perspectives that we can look at in a performative genealogy. Just like Roach's effigy, the woman in red is innately performative, since 'it fills by means of surrogation a vacancy created by the absence of an original' (36). Following Roach's argument, the many women in red effigies (re)produce a method for different communities to perpetuate themselves. The performance and theatre artists in the second tier of iterations then become the 'surrogates' 'to hold open a place in memory into which many different people may step' (ibid.).

Other scholars have proposed different ways to look at the versatility of the Turkish woman in red phenomenon, for example through Campbell's monomyth theory (Aliç 2014), image deconstruction (McLeod 2016) or social transformation theory identifying the woman in red as a new type of Solidarist individualism (Turkmen 2018). Yet the meshing of theatrical and performative modes underlying the protest image and all its variants, while inspiring a form of 'agency', 'embodiment' and 'new political identity' in flux, has so far gone unexplored. The concept of the effigy allows for a complex discussion that goes beyond the surface of the original image whose constituting event is already absent. Roach's notion of a performance genealogy then helps to unpack the metamorphosis of this image from an iconic signifier in social protest to a performative surrogate that enables protesters and theatre artists alike to demand recognition of their subjectivity and their memory, particularly in times when that memory is tainted and in the process of deliberate effacement.

Performed effigies may be inanimate, signifying the absence of the original, or elusive or more politically charged than their originals; they may also be physical sites, embodiments, presences or acts that reconstitute 'mnemonic reserves' (26) where memory and imagination converge – leaving room for kinaesthetic imagination – and themselves create a performed narrative 'at once remembered

⁴ The iconization was perhaps already prepared in the original picture, as many read a 'universal' struggle represented by it, as Harding comments in *The Guardian* (5 June 2013): '[T]he image also feels universal. It shows one peaceful protester, dressed as if for a summer garden party, standing up for basic human and green values against an arrogant and mighty state' ('Turkey's Resistance Image').

⁵ Besides the woman in red, there was a woman in black (*siyahlı kadın*), standing man (*duran adam*), 'Çarşı' (a Beşiktaş football hooligan), naked citizen (*çıplak vatandaş*), reading man (*kitap okuyan adam*, which was a version of standing man), guitar-playing youth (*gitar çalan genç*, aka Guitar Hero), a moonwalking 'dancing man' (*dans eden adam*), Redhack, and Talcid man (referring to the trademarked drug that together with water appeases irritation caused by tear gas around mouth, nose and eyes). By way of commemorating Gezi's second birthday, a video was produced by Infografik that brought these icons to live in a short animation (see Infografik 2015).

⁶ This is what Turkmen (2018) described as a new type of Solidarist individualism.

■ Figure 3. Detailed list of Gezi icons entitled *Yenilmezler* (the Avengers), posted online anonymously. There are different versions of this compound image, which circulated during the Gezi protests in 2013 as a visual meme.

and reinvented' (27). From its beginning as a photograph in the press, the 'woman in red' became such an effigy when it was re-embraced by the protestors as an iconic depiction of their struggle. From Peirce's theory of signs (1932 [1867–]), we know that iconization is based on a representational process in which a sign retains a similarity with its original appearance or referent, yet reimagines the latter in a pure, essentialized abstraction of its quality (its ground) (Elam 2005 [1980, 2002]: 19; Deely 1982: 61).⁴ Abstraction, as we can see in many cartoons and depictions of the woman in red, retained and even purposefully abstracted the theatrical quality of the original photograph. The woman in red was only the first in a long string of Gezi icons based on real individualized protest acts; by way of celebrating the creativity, heroism and pluralism of protestors' identities, these icons were turned into simplified stock characters in a cartoon universe that live a digital life on social media but have real referents in public life.⁵



Iconization also played a significant ideological role in the genealogy of the woman in red. Bens *et al.* (2019) stress the affective impact that abstraction had, in cleaning the 'background noise' of Orsal's original photograph, thus

dramatizing the relation between oppressor (police) and oppressed (protestor) but also highlighting the gender dynamic between the two. Indeed, for all its artistic framing (*bracketing*) and theatricality, the image at once reveals a deeper gendered dynamic in the protests since women's participation was significant in many protestors' stance against the government's increasingly patriarchal, racist, heteronormative and capitalist austerity policies (Potuoğlu-Cook 2015). Vis-à-vis a public space defined as (mostly) masculine, as well as the predominantly male police corps that we can see behind the barricade of shields framing the action (Ming 2013), the single resisting woman in red stood out against other women-led protests during the Gezi revolt, such as the Kurdish mourning 'Saturday Mothers', the 'Peace Mothers' and other rallies in Gezi Park that called for justice and vigilance through maternal authority (Cetinkaya 2020).

The iconized assault depicted by the woman in red helped to build new forms of political subjectivity and identity that were meant to be shared affectively and collectively, particularly among young women, who formed a majority in the protests.⁶ The icon helped ordinary citizens to 'disseminate public positions' and popularize dissent (Bens *et al.* 2019: 64). Hence, it became quite common that female protestors would wear red garments, mimicking Sungur's initial bravery, and thereby steering the attention away from their own individuality. An often-heard saying was that women no longer felt afraid of facing state and police violence in the ongoing protests. In recognition of the impact of the woman in red phenomenon, an unnamed protestor, surrounded by hundreds of protestors, performed the famous 1980s song 'Lady in Red' from Chris de Burgh on a piano draped with red LED lights on 13 June 2013 on Taksim Square, two days before the park was cleared by riot police. The dozens of remediations of the icon on social media even reached the mainstream media with the publication of a miniature painting by Taha Alkan on the cover of the last online issue of the history magazine *NTV Tarih*, published on 8 July 2013, one week after the Doğu Broadcasting Group censored NTV due to its coverage of the protests.⁷ Art historian

⁷ The issue was posted on a now disbanded website, titled '#yaşarken yazılan tarih', meaning: history written while it is lived (see Göncü 2013).

Wendy Shaw (2014 [2013]) commented on her blog, 'Like the "anonymous" Guy Fawkes mask of the Occupy protests, the erasure of individual identity furthered the production of a diverse yet collective voice continuing to emerge both graphically and performatively.'

'FRAMING' THE REVOLUTION

In the genealogy of the woman in red phenomenon, the performative spill-over of the image into an icon and then a performed effigy constituted a blurring of the boundaries between activism and artivism. One key aspect in Roach's performance genealogy is exactly this intertwining of the social and the artistic for communities to express themselves. The woman in red demonstrates that we cannot simply separate the political from artistic activism. Belgian art historian and philosopher Lieven de Cauter, however, provocatively does separate the two realms in his fourteen theses on Art and Activism (2013). I choose to take issue with de Cauter's theses here, since they help us to better understand how the theatrical aspects of Gezi's socio-political interventions, such as the woman in red effigies and their ensuing theatrical appearances on the stage, can work together to advance the protestors' concerns yet speak to different social environments.

In his first thesis, de Cauter makes a rather crude distinction:

There is only one real form of activism and it is political activism. Action is a deed in the public sphere, the space of appearance. Therefore, political activism is the only real form of activism. Artistic activism is almost never real, for it is not action but 'acting', a play in the cultural sphere, the sphere of the mimetic and the performative.

It seems that de Cauter is alluding here to the old platonic dualism that the realm of the arts can only imitate life and, therefore, cannot make any real truth claims in the Arendtian space of appearance nor the Habermasian public sphere. In this differentiation, political activism strives to bring about direct political or social change through *action*, whereas artistic activism remains in the cultural realm of semiotics and affects – for de Cauter, the 'mimetic and the performative' – through the creative power of the arts to bring

about social change. His notion of the relation between art and activism is rather reductionist. To separate them in terms of their supposed efficacy in the real is to ignore that the public sphere and the modern-day political landscape are mediated landscapes of signs and symbols, narratives and spectacles, and therefore, also always cultural. In other words, de Cauter's claim is based on a misplaced bourgeois conception of the public sphere as a 'space of zero degree culture' (Fraser 1990: 64).

Moreover, as de Cauter further contends, the arts are 'part and parcel of the cultural middle-class spectacle' (sixth thesis) dedicated to specific spaces – 'a sphere outside (besides, in between) the private sphere (economy) and the public sphere (the political)' (second thesis), so they cannot change society at large. Yet this assumed uncommon union of arts and politics in the public sphere and civic spaces has, in the last decade, been in an accelerated debate for its efficacy in mobilizing affect and effect. De Cauter does acknowledge, however, the critical role of the arts for spreading consciousness in 'slow motion, almost in retrospect' and for showing and evoking reality, not necessarily changing it; or as he states in the ninth thesis: 'The mimetic power of art is the true power of art, its true task: reshuffling the sensible.' Due to their versatile appearance and uses, the woman in red iterations sit and move right in between political and artistic activism; yet as we will see, their theatricality and mimetic power, thus their *artist* vehicle, are the real core of their impact on society, pushing the boundaries of de Cauter's theses, while they also invite us to rethink his class-based critique of what art and theatre could really do in a context like Turkey.

The remediation of the first woman in red images can arguably be linked to a specific class context, as these effigies predominantly belonged to the educated middle-class. Yet as Burkev (2013) noted, 'the middle classes leading the revolt are the losing ones, that is to say the proletarianized middle classes', whose conditions have been worsening under neoliberal policies. Yılmaz explains that despite the middle-class status of most of the protestors, the transformative politics of becoming and togetherness that they embodied are not

reducible to class-based worldviews, ‘insofar as protesters were able to revise their accompanying social and political group habitus, which was structured around their daily practices, emotional orientations, and conventional opinions about other groups’ (56–7). The performative genealogy of the woman in red, which inspired the production of new figures and models of the thinkable, allowed for a political imagination that many different social groups and actors could identify with and use to convey ‘political and emotional messages that function in building transindividual political bonds’ (Yılmaz 2018: 72, citing Bayart 1996: 149).

The pro-government press, however, attempted to disrupt and delegitimize this genealogy when they understood the power of the Reuters photograph. Their disruption was targeted at incriminating the authenticity of the protests by means of a preceding occurrence of a woman in red on the theatre stage (played by Pınar Ögün) in the production *Mi Minör*, which ran from 1 December 2012 until 14 April 2013 at Istanbul’s KüçükÇiftlik Park. Inspired by the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, WikiLeaks and Anonymous, playwright Meltem Arıkan had written the play in 2012 to reflect on a world that had exchanged the analogue for the digital. In the play, we see a president of the fictional country Pinima – played by Memet Ali Alabora, who was also the director of the play – becoming a dictator after political reform. The audience is hailed by a female pianist character in a red dress who tries to convince them to support a rebellion against the system. Through the use of social media and a live video feed on Ustream, audience members could also interact with the fictionalized persona of the dictator, though in a limited way. Through the figures of the woman in red and the president, the performance tested the audience’s taste for a representative democracy, showing democracy to be ‘ultimately not grounded in anything more reliable than the politician’s ability to perform and the political audience’s willingness to buy into this performance’ (Peetz 2019: 65).

The similarity of contestation between *Mi Minör*’s pianist in red and Gezi’s woman in red effigies against a politician’s performance in an electoral system that is increasingly

autocratic yet similarly based on a parliamentary representative democracy, apparently caught the attention of pro-government media. The dismissal of the play in the press at the height of the Gezi protests seemed ‘rehearsed’ in more than one way. One of the main events in this dismissal was the publication of an article in the conservative Islamist newspaper *Yeni Şafak* (‘New Dawn’) on 10 June 2013. With the headline ‘First on Stage, Then in Taksim’, the article sought to discredit the play for the alleged role it had played in ‘preparing the revolution’. In Turkish, the word *prova* (rehearsal) was deliberately used, referring to theatre discourse. The article also featured the Reuters photograph, thereby drawing a direct connection. In the following days, pro-government media prompted a ‘lynch justice’ on Alabora and his team, including Arıkan and Ögün who later fled into exile in Wales to escape a warrant for their arrest.



The delegitimizing of the protests as a genuine political movement through the analogy to the theatre performance revealed a discursive battle between rightist-populist and leftist-nationalist narratives. Alabora, for instance, made a direct reference to Namık Kemal’s play ‘*Vatan Yahut Silistre* which was performed two streets away from our stage in 1873’ (Güncellenme 2013, cited and translated in Başar 2015: 27) before the Republic was established and that was censored due to Kemal’s strong opposition to the then-oppressive regime. This historical reference showcases the longer-standing entanglement of political and artistic activism in Turkey, against de Cauter’s distinctions, with the theatre precisely as a space of (assumed) contention. This makes the woman in red effigy in all her theatricality

■ Figure 4. Actress Pınar Ögün as the Pianist in *Mi Minör* (2012) accidentally wears a red dress. Photo © Payidar Seyma Bestay

and social relevance so interesting to look at. Her continuous re-framings as an iconic figure extend a kinaesthetic imagination of Gezi's politics of *becoming* to the realms of theatre and performance. The following two sections address further how performed effigies of the woman in red transgress de Cauter's problematic dualism of political and creative activism, and what role theatre can play in this, in terms of 'agonistic solidarity'.

PERFORMING 'EFFIGIES'

The appropriation of the woman in red by protestors inspired many theatre and performance artists to do the same, carrying the performative 'effigy' from the street into the theatre. A significant point of transition is marked by dancer Gonca Gümüşayak, who through improvisation at Gezi Park in the night,



as a guerrilla theatre tactic, came to embody the woman in red in her street performance, *Liquid Politics (Likit Politika)* (2014–16).⁸ In an interview with me she explained that she was inspired by Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid modernity to describe and critique global late-capitalist society. She started from the idea of portraying an authority figure of bureaucracy as spineless and used this as a principle for her 'liquid' moving patterns. This figure was represented by a mask that she would wear on the back of her neck, inspired by how the protestors would wear their gas masks. Gradually, she would then transform into the woman in red dress by undressing herself.

Liquid Politics is a powerful evocation of the initial drama of oppression iconized in the Reuters photograph but with its associated

performed effigy turned in a state of constant flux through dance. Gümüşayak's intention was to show 'liquidity' in a double sense: on the one hand, she wanted to convey how to cope with our liquid modern-day lives (Bauman 2000), but on the other, she also felt the need to use her dance as a protest itself to oppose state power embodied by the 'power figure of Turkey', Erdoğan, with a powerless character, the woman in red. By embodying the woman in red, Gümüşayak also wanted to bring the character to life again outside the rigidity of the Reuters photograph, as she explains:

The photograph was created by the media, and people took it as an icon. I also took the image from the icon. But as there were many other icons created throughout the Gezi protests ... I take all of these symbols, as for me, the woman in red dress represents all of them ... Taking her as a symbol of freedom, of equality, of people claiming their rights ... I wanted to recall all these ideas. I wanted people to remember them again.⁹

By embodying the woman in red, Gümüşayak turns the icon into a performative effigy and aims 'to produce memory through surrogation' (Roach 1996: 36). As such, her 'liquid' performance of power figure and woman in red moves from political to artistic activism, and back again. In our interview, she explained how she repeated the performance in public spaces up until 2015, but that she had to stop when the public sphere was threatened with frequent terrorist bombings in 2016. On one occasion, on 9 December 2014, she appeared only as the woman in red during the Caferağa protest in Istanbul's Kadıköy neighbourhood in support of a squat building (*Caferağa mahalli evi*). She recounts how she first put her coat on backwards and only when she was near the police did she reveal the red dress. She saw the confusion in the police officers' eyes. The photographer Ozan Köse took her photo, just like the original Reuters photographer once snapped Ceyda Sungur's picture, which would remove the image from herself as a referent of a referent, now thrice over.¹⁰

It is such redistribution of images we have seen in the many visual genres and media that turned the first woman in red into an icon, that inspired artists like Gümüşayak to turn

⁹ The interview was carried out through Zoom on 20 July 2021.

■ Figure 5. Poster for *Likit Politika (Liquid Politics)* for Kunst für Widerstand, performed by Gonca Gümüşayak in Vienna 2013. Artwork © Özgür Sevinç

⁸ Videos of her performances can be seen on Gümüşayak's website (see Gümüşayak 2018).

¹⁰ The irony of this distancing act is that in 2018, someone found Gümüşayak's image on a billboard in a Paris metro station to advertise a radio station. Gümüşayak's performance had always evaded encapsulation as she moved between visual codes and regimes, yet now her woman in red was framed again and taken to a different, commercial context.

■ Figure 6. Taken by an anonymous photographer on 9 December 2014 around Caferağa Mahalle Evi in Istanbul's Kadıköy neighbourhood during the protests after the Caferağa Squat House was evicted by the police. Photo from the personal archives of Gonca Gümüşayak



the symbol into a performative effigy, thus performing a balancing act between political and artistic activism to contest dominating power politics. The different 'publics' she affectively addresses in her street performances have, however, changed dramatically over the last few years as the Turkish state apparatus has become more repressive, making her work impossible, which clearly shows that her political and creative activism were indeed (seen as) inseparable.

AGONISTIC SOLIDARITY

As a final question, I wish to address the transition between de Cauter's distinctive realms of protest: What do performed effigies of the woman in red really *do*, particularly when they move from the street to the theatre stage, from political to artistic activism? It is my contention that theatre can appeal to a humanitarian spectatorship close to what Chouliaraki describes in her book *The Ironic Spectator* (2013) as a humanitarianism that has drastically shifted towards the end of the twentieth century from a solidarity of pity to 'irony'. This irony is defined by the belief that, rather than a focal point on distant sufferers as objective truth, a shift towards the spectator and their subjective experiences, emotions and actions beyond grand narratives of universal morality and pity is the only effective mode of engagement today.

Within that, 'agonistic solidarity' – a term borrowed from Arendt (1998 [1958]) and Silverstone (2006) – appears as a compelling ethical response towards moral education through theatrical engagement, namely one that recognizes the distance between benefactors

and sufferers while safeguarding the voice of the latter from being silenced or dismissed by the romantic orientalism or narcissism of the former. What theatre can do is respond to the moral stake of actively construing the world as 'common and shared', an act of solidarity in its own right (Chouliaraki 2013: 19). This act is agonistic, in the Arendtian sense, in that it refers to the 'agonism' of the public realm, the 'space of appearance', where 'everything ... can be seen and heard by everybody' (Arendt 1998 [1958]: 45), and where acts of 'being seen and heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position' (57). Agonistic solidarity in the theatre then takes the political activism of the woman in red further into the realm of affect, the redistribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004), while adopting differing standpoints 'as claims to public interest' rather than self-expression (Chouliaraki 2013: 21).

We see instances of such agonistic solidarity in three 'post-Gezi' productions that all mimetically reiterate the woman in red effigy in some way or another. The earliest production, which premiered on 17 August 2013 when the protests were dying down, is *Taksim Square/Taksim Meydani*, a 'Songplay' (2013) by Talimhane Tiyatrosu and Neuköllner Oper. This play reinterpreted the woman in red as a prostitute, caught for catfishing by a police officer in Gezi Park, which prompts the audience to look at the events as they unfold from a more sceptical outsider's point of view. Through theatricality and songs, including the famous Gezi anthem 'Boyun Eğmeyenler' ('Those Who Do Not Bend'), the production played with positionality, recognition and perspective.¹¹ Its main function was to galvanize both Turkish and international audiences through a theatrical rendition of Gezi's most iconic narratives, protest master frames, graffiti and social media art, while authorities in Turkey were erasing their traces and symbols from the public eye.

As such, the woman in red effigy functions in the theatre to extend the political activism of the Gezi movement to wider audiences, affecting new 'publics' outside Turkey, in this case a mixed German-Turkish audience. Of course, the audiences in Turkey and Germany might

¹¹ Compositions by Çiğdem Erken, Nazan Öncel, Can Erdoğan-Sus, Yiğit Özatalay and others.

have been equally mixed in their opinions, as the ones in Germany had more distance to the protests than their Turkish counterparts, and the different generations in the Turkish diaspora in Berlin are equally diversified in their affective relation to Turkey, including their political imaginations and standpoints. The play then concretely helps to sustain community building and commemoration, shared by people who do not always completely agree with one another, in times when precisely that community sharing and the public commemoration of Gezi are not possible back in Turkey. The woman in red effigy in this production is one of the vehicles that stands both outside the events ('a woman in red') as well as inside (referring to 'the woman in red'), allowing the audience to take different positions.



We see a similar use of a woman in red in the songplay *Taksim Forever–Rüyalar parkı/Park der Träume* ('Park of Dreams'), which premiered in August 2014 at the Neuköllner Oper in Berlin Kreuzberg.¹² The play revolves around the love relationship between a German-Turkish soundman and a Turkish academic/feminist activist called Leyla, who refers to the original woman in red but this time wears a red scarf. This particular woman in red effigy tells a story of generational conflict in the post-migrant Turkish-German community, illustrated by a conflict between Leyla and her mother, who draws a comparison between the Gezi protests and the horror of her husband's exile to Germany after the Taksim Square massacre of 1 May 1977. A strong commemorative moment in the performance is when Leyla sings the protest song 'Tencere Tava Havası' (Sound of Pots and Pans,

originally by Kardeş Türküler), reminiscent of one of Gezi's tactical repertoires where people would bang pots and pans every night at 9 p.m. in response to Erdoğan's phrase, 'I will say one thing: pots and pans, same old tune', to heckle the Gezi protestors. As highlighted through the song, this performance's rite of passage of a young woman in red strongly appeals to the feminist response in Turkey. Ideologically, this woman in red is closer to the newly awakened political youth that rediscovers and commemorates Turkey's socialist past in the 1970s and 1980s. She also stands for Gezi's proletarianized middle classes looking outward to the interconnectedness between Germany and Turkey as represented through her love interest for a German-Turkish man, hoping for some kind of solution in the middle.



■ Figure 7 (left). A 'woman in red dress' (played by Defne Koldaş) appears in the musical theatre production *Taksim Meydanı* (2013) by Talimhane Tiyatrosu, directed by Memet Ergen. The photographer's name is withheld. *Published with permission of Memet Ergen*

■ Figure 8 (right). Leyla (played by Pinar Erincin), here in the middle with ensemble, in *Taksim Forever–Rüyalar parkı/Park der Träume* (2014), wears a red scarf in reference of Gezi's woman in red. *Photo © Matthias Heyde*

The last post-Gezi theatre production that featured a woman in red, this time in a red parka jacket, is *Last Park Standing (DSE)* (2019) at Schauspiel Stuttgart.¹³ This play took the performative effigy further to focus on a same-sex relationship of two women, both academics, one from Berlin, the other named 'Umut' (meaning 'hope') from Istanbul, and thus commemorated Gezi's LGBTQ+ demands for the freedom to be simply free. A significant critique in the press was that both characters are quite class-privileged, even when they are forced into exile after the coup attempt of 2016: their relationship is not challenged by cultural differences even when they live an online long-distance relationship, but is only put under pressure by an external epistemic violence (Becker 2019). The LGBTQ+ dimension is of particular relevance as it resonates further

¹² A promotional trailer can be found on YouTube (see Neukölln Oper 2014).

¹³ A trailer can be seen on YouTube (see Schauspiel Stuttgart 2019). There was also an earlier version, *Benimle Gelir Misin?* (2019), which was produced as part of Maksim Gorki Theater's *Parça Parça Savaş* project in Berlin.

with current protests in Turkey against police crackdowns on the LGBTQ+ community, like on Boğaziçi University's campus in Istanbul in 2021 but also earlier, with the yearly disbandment of Istanbul's Pride Parade since 2015. The play thereby sustains visibility for the struggles of same-sex relationships in Turkey by reclaiming Turkey's restricted space of appearance on the stage.



■ Figure 9. Umut (played by Josephine Köhler on the right) in *Last Park Standing* (DSE) (2019), recalls Gezi's woman in red by wearing a red parka jacket. Photo © Björn Klein

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have shown how the genealogy of the woman in red starting from the original photograph and immediately refunctioned digitally as (re)mediated protest gave impetus for multiple re-embodiments of the figure as surrogate effigy, moving freely between the street, social media and the theatre stage, with a second tier of performed effigies on the international stage calling for agonistic solidarity. I have nuanced de Cauter's distinction between political and artistic interventions in terms of their claims as 'real' forms of activism, giving evidence that the two do not have to exist in separation from each other. Rather, as Gümüşayak's *Liquid Politics* performance clearly demonstrated, the many reiterations of the woman in red effigy allow her to resist total encapsulation by any aesthetic regime since the image also moves in the political imagination of the beholder observing (some of) the effigy's remediations.

De Cauter's class-based critique, however, does hold to some extent for the productions I examined here, as well as the common political imaginary of Gezi's potentially 'divergent sociality' (Arda 2015), embodied by the many women in red. De Cauter's provoking theses would have us believe that this sociality, as well as the publics that are addressed, stay within the cultural and thus mimetic and performative spheres, trapped with all their solidarity, just like Umut in *Last Park Standing* (DSE), behind the glass fourth wall. The woman in red's underlying class politics may indeed pose limitations, in tandem with the 'bourgeois' German stages that bring her to dramatic life. Yet her genealogy of all her appearances and effigies remains performative and may potentially affect competing publics and inoperative communities (Nancy 1991 [1986]) that share the same goal to construe the world as 'common and shared', as the image continues to trouble the political imaginations and positionings of a new, resilient generation.

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