Forms of visual protest on the Internet. Cultural semiotic dimensions of digital images during the Tunisian Revolution (2010-2013)

Summary

Julius Erdmann

Collective protest leading to the revolutionary uprising of January 2011 in Tunisia and coming along with the post revolutionary socio-cultural transition phase, particularly drew on digital images on Facebook as main resources for protest communication. These images served as instances to criticize the regime of former president Ben Ali and the following transitional regimes. Through their esthetic and semantic contents, the pictorial composition and collective, communicative shaping of their visual meaning, protestors reflected, anticipated and constructed the political reality.

The cultural semiotic reading of the images published on Facebook between 2010 and 2013 considers them as individual and collective acts of communication, leading to a change of cultural dynamics and structures of meaning. The thesis is thus based upon a close semiotic reading of these images on the one hand and upon qualitative interviews with principal actors of the protests (as a correction to a possible misreading of the images) on the other. The application of this methodology permits to examine the protests in a holistic way and to show that a new visual culture of protest with specific semiotic codes and resources was born in Tunisia.

The author shows that this Tunisian protest culture uses images to define its symbolic borders to hegemonic political cultures. Through images, new concepts of the nation-state are created, individual and collective protest actions are authenticated and visually constructed, and myths as well as heroes of the revolution are imagined. Thus, the publication of protest-images serves to deconstruct the semiotic structures of hegemonic politics and to create a collective of protest actors. However, images as

protest resources are also appropriated by political actors and parties in order to use the memory of the revolution for their ideological framing.