IMAGE AND IMITATION

THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF PRO-RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

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Abstract. This article explores the counter-narratives launched against Ukrainian popular and nationalist causes in 2013 and 2014. It engages with semiotic and visual anthropological theory to articulate how these counter narratives are designed and how they are meant to work. Many pro-Russian acts of propaganda and provocations made use of the specific iconography with which Maidan was branded and its participants were branded in public imagination. This tactic amounted to blatant mimicry, and it appeared in countless forms from Anti-Maidan ‘stickering’ campaigns in Kyiv’s Mariinsky Park to Russian soldiers posing as local ‘self defense brigades’ in Crimea. While this visual imitation may appear simple and straightforward, I argue that highly sophisticated semiotic techniques were used to disrupt the interpretation of photographic images. This technique exploits the fluidity of what Roland Barthes calls ‘the third meaning’ of images for the purpose of granting the appearance of legitimacy to politically motivated counter narratives. Though

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these counter narratives cannot be fully evidenced (because they are not true), they accomplish their goals by generating faith in a false objectivity of the image. They dislodge the viewer’s faith in the myth of photographic truth, even while encouraging the viewer to believe in that truth.

Keywords: media, propaganda, images, semiotics, Maidan, Crimea, Donbas.
In a recent op-ed published in *The Guardian*, Peter Pomerantsev, a British television producer who worked for the Russian channel TNT from 2006-2010, recalled his discovery of a very unusual instruction book. He described the Russian-language manual, entitled *Information-Psychological War Operation: a Short Encyclopedia and Reference Guide*, as “a kind of user’s manual for junior information warriors” (Pomerantsev, 2015). The purpose of information warfare, according to this manual, was not to generate an alternative explanation of events but rather to “influence social relations” and “[act] like an invisible radiation” on its audiences. “The population itself,” the manual reads, “doesn’t even feel it is being acted upon” (Veprintsev et al., 2011, cited in Pomerantsev, 2015). Four techniques for producing this form of “invisible radiation” are outlined in the manual: military operational deception (*maskirovka*); programmatical-mathematical influence (which I take to mean the manipulation of election totals, ministerial budget sheets, and other statistical instruments); imitation; and disinformation. Pomerantsev was surprised by the book’s imperatives. They violated his own understanding of what constitutes “information war”; he had originally pictured two political powers duking it out over different versions of the truth. Instead, the techniques described were ostensibly designed to produce a shifting and “spongy” sense of reality—one he recognized as a rather commonplace struggle for so many media professionals in post-Maidan Ukraine.

Though these tactics are certainly not unique to the Russian context, disinformation campaigns of Russian origin have, of late, captured public
imagination in a powerful way. Disinformation, very generally defined, is false information spread with the intent to deceive. In popular imagination today, disinformation may take the form of activities ranging from a false flag operation to the purposeful misinterpretation of data to the defense of unsubstantiated claims and propaganda. Within the sphere of Russia’s alleged activities, for example, new connections have been drawn between Edward Snowden (who is wanted in the United States for treason), the online Wikileaks project, and Kremlin sponsored political agendas (Beauchamp, 2017; Kelley, 2014; Wilentz, 2014). The Russian news channel RT (a stylized shortening of the original name, Russia Today) has been openly criticized by media analysts as a propaganda arm of the Kremlin, an organ designed to disseminate disinformation amongst Western and English speaking audiences to promote specific ideological views (Ioffe, 2010; The Economist, 2017). Even now, at the time of writing, the US government is preparing to launch a formal investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential campaign via the strategic hacking of and selective release of information from the Democratic political party, activities allegedly designed to sour public opinion of then-presidential candidate Hilary Clinton (Kelly, 2017). As has been noted by scholars of Eastern Europe too numerous to cite, these tactics are not new. What is new, in the current moment, is the influence these tactics are meeting out in North American and Western European politics as well as growth in public awareness of disinformation efforts in the English-speaking world.

The purpose of these disinformation campaigns, according to critics, is the consolidation of political power through the unsettling of truth,
rather than through the promotion of a coherent set of alternative facts or selected truths. For example, Ben Nimmo, writing for the *Foreign Policy*, described Russian media coverage of the MH17 crash in Eastern Ukraine\(^2\) as “a disinformation operation of unprecedented scope and scale,” which engaged government offices, news channels like RT, and armies of internet trolls to articulate and provide something akin to evidence for numerous, contradictory explanations for the crash – none of which implicated the Russian Federation (Nimmo, 2016). Historian Timothy Snyder has observed, “Russian propaganda provides both sides of the story. [American audiences] assume that the truth is in between. But no truth lies between propositions that are individually false and mutually contradictory” (Snyder, 2014).

Laying the ideological groundwork for the current “fake news” crisis in the United States, the impact of this dizzying array of misinformation emerging from Russian political and media spheres should not be underestimated.

The purpose of this article, is to turn our attention to the edges rough edges of XX campaigns in Eastern Europe, focusing especially less well-known technique of deception and informational warfare—one of the key tools outlined in the Pomerantsev’s found manual—currently emerging from within the Russian sphere of influence: *imitation*. By this, I mean the deliberate attempt to make one thing appear as though it is really another by copying its features. Methods of imitation typically generate less public

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\(^2\) Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (or MH17) was a commercial airliner on its way from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur that crashed into land occupied by separatists in the Donbas region on July 17, 2014. All 283 passengers on board were killed. By September, evidence had emerged that the plane was struck down by a Buk missile, an advanced anti-aircraft system, which had been brought into the separatist zone from Russia and was under the control of Russian and Russian-backed fighters. Russia’s government has formally denied any culpability for the crash. ("MH17 Ukraine plane crash," 2016)
scandal than disinformation campaigns, as it is a tool with a much lower profile and requires far fewer resources. The more well-known techniques, such as disseminating alternative narratives through state-controlled television news operations, are not cheap, and though comment may be free, hiring a small army of individuals to post stylistically manipulated commentary on Twitter and other social media sites requires real, actual cash. Imitation, on the other hand, can be achieved by a few select operatives working in a concerted fashion at a strategic time and place.

Take, for example, the 1999 bombings of apartment complexes in several of Russia’s major urban centers. On August 31, 1999, an explosion at a popular shopping mall in Moscow city center left one person dead and injured many more. This began a chain of explosions that included bombings at no less than three apartment buildings, two in Moscow and one in Buynaksk, and in the city of Volgodonsk a truck explosion so powerful that more than one thousand people were injured—all within the next two weeks. Hundreds of civilians were killed. That these acts were carried out by Chechens, a Muslim minority that had been engaged in a military conflict with Russia over territories in the south, seemed all but self-evident (Gessen, 2012). Vladimir Putin, who had been just elected Prime Minister in August of that year, was quick to cement the official narrative and blame Chechen terrorists for these events, quickly constructing a justification for the Second Chechen War, an escalated military engagement, which soon sent his once-abysmal approval ratings through the roof. These events, which kicked off Putin’s consolidation of political power in the Russian Federation, appeared quite clearly, even as
they took place, to have been orchestrated not by Chechen rebels but by members of Russia’s own security service, the FSB. In a particularly egregious slip up that revealed the farcical origins of these explosions, one Russian parliamentarian mistakenly announced one of the apartment bombings (a.k.a “terror attacks”) several days before that bomb actually went off (Snyder, 2017).

The apartment bombings served as proof of concept that relatively small-scale operations of mimicry and imitation can have a significant effect on the political trajectory of a nation or on geopolitical arrangements more broadly (in this example, FSB agents were overtly imitating alleged terrorist tactics for the sake of making the public believe that these bombings were, in fact, terrorist acts). Such informational warfare through imitation rarely emerges in places as far-flung as Western Europe or North America, I presume, for want of actual boots on the ground to carry out such activities. Nevertheless, imitation remains a go-to method for information warfare in the region geographically proximal to Moscow—especially in those countries situated squarely within the Russian Federation’s sphere of influence.

Informational warfare through imitation also diverges from current disinformation campaigns in that it does not project specific counter narratives—alternative explanations of events designed with the intent of replacing the common narrative with a new one carefully crafted for political ends. By its very nature, imitation relies on the adoption of clear narrative roles and subjectivities in order to be legible to the target audience. Yet, rather than contradicting those narratives, imitation seeks to
enhance them, to exaggerate their power over popular imagination for the political control that power can afford. If the public can’t make sense of what they are seeing, even if what they are seeing is a falsehood, then the attempt at imitation will be for naught. For example, if the apartment bombings were not crafted to appear like terrorist attacks, and if the government were not able to caption these events as terrorist attacks in the media (if, instead, disinformation campaigns sought to promote multiple contradictory narratives all at once), the public would have had no idea what to make of these explosions. By making them appear to be terrorist attacks, these imitative efforts were able to harness public dismay and fear of terrorist activity, to amplify those fears and direct that energy towards achieving the political goals of the new Putin regime.

In this article, I train my analysis on acts of imitation that were carried out during the Maidan Revolution in Kyiv, Ukraine, between November 2013 and February 2014 and from the crises in Crimea and the Donbas region, which ramped up in the months that followed. I focus, in particular, on tropes of visual imagery that emerged from the protests and surreptitious attempts to reproduce those tropes for purposes of informational warfare. Many counter protests and provocations made use of the specific iconography with which Maidan was branded. This tactic, which appeared in countless forms from Anti-Maidan fake grassroots movement in in Kyiv’s Mariinsky Park to Russian soldiers posing as local “self defense brigades” in Crimea, amounted to little more than blatant, politically motivated mimicry.
While such examples of imitation may appear to be facile or transparent, I argue here that sophisticated semiotic techniques were (and still are) being used to disrupt the public's interpretation of particular images for the benefit of those deploying counter narratives, even while encouraging the viewer to believe in a specific truth with which they are presented. With the help of foundational theories of semiotics and cognition put forward by theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles S. Pierce, and Roland Barthes, my aim is to put into words the strategies employed by the authors of counter-narratives in the ongoing political and military conflicts in Ukraine—to pull back a veil that is thick only insofar as the average media consumer lacks a standardized vocabulary for talking about these phenomena. This exercise will not only be profitable for responding to these counter narratives but also for gaining a deeper understanding of the culture and ideology out of which they are formed. For, as much as polyvalent disinformation campaigns may have captured the attention of media critics and post-Soviet scholars alike, disinformation does not monopolize propaganda strategies in Eastern Europe; other approaches also merit our attention.

A Brief Anatomy of The Image

The first step in understanding how imitation functions as a tool of information warfare is examining how images and texts convey meaning differently. Anthropologist and professional photo-journalist Danny Hoffman articulated this difference well in his 2012 photo essay entitled *Corpus: Mining the Border*, which was published online by the journal
Cultural Anthropology. In this project, Hoffman penned a short essay about the socio-political and military contexts that cause young men to find themselves engaged in the grueling labor of alluvial diamond minds on the Sierra Leonean border. He paired segments of this essay with hypnotic, devastating photographs of young, strong, male bodies mid-course in acts of strenuous manual labor. These images present what he calls “an ethnographic portrait of the shape and texture of work” (Hoffman, 2012).

In his accompanying essay, Hoffman argues that text and image are both necessary to successfully present his argument, based on extensive ethnographic work in Sierra Leone, that military conflict and manual labor bear on these men's bodies in indistinguishable ways. He writes:

There is an excessiveness to the images that terms like work and labor, when rendered as text on the page, simply cannot register. The work, like the miners who do it, has a militant masculinity about it. Text can chart the larger political economy in which the mines and miners are situated (something the images alone cannot adequately do). But only the momentary alienation sparked by the visual image of this mode of work conveys the materiality of West African diamond mining as labor...I have argued elsewhere for understanding the labors of these young men on the battlefield and on the mines as qualitatively identical, but bound by terms like ‘war’ and ‘work,’ the text alone invariably re-inscribes a qualitative difference between the two. The image collapses that
distinction and allows it to register as an affront. (Hoffman, 2012).

What Hoffman points to, and what is key for the analysis presented here, is that both text and image convey meaning; both can be used in argument either as evidence or as a tool of persuasion; both are culturally inflected and open to interpretation by the viewer. However, text and image are incapable of performing the same kind of symbolic work. It is a very different act to explain with words the similarities between war and work than it is to capture the taught and rigid physique of exploited men on film, just as it is thing very different act to print a headline reading “Protests in Kyiv turn Violent” and to circulate an image of an activist in the act of throwing a Molotov cocktail.

The language used by cultural anthropologists—among others—to discuss the mechanisms by which both text and image convey meaning has
been shaped in large part by the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure was interested not only in language but in how language gave rise to meaningful human thought. He criticized the characterization of language as a simple, “name-giving system” (2011, p. 16) which rested on the assumption that humans possessed a priori sets of categories or “ready-made ideas” (2011, p. 65). Instead, he proposed that all signs were composed of two parts, a signifier—a representation in some form—and a signified object, which had to be paired with one another in order for the object to be comprehensible or ‘thinkable’ (2011, pp. 66–67). In spoken or written language, Saussure’s primary area of work, the signifier and the signified would consist, respectively, of a sound-image, or perhaps even a written word like ‘tree’ on the one hand and, on the other, a single, whole concept or object, such as the large oak growing in my backyard. Each of these elements, the signifier and the signified, cannot be meaningful in any way without its connection to the other. A meaningless, gobbledygook word (a signifier without a signified) or an unnamed object or concept (a potential signified with no signifier) would be equally incomprehensible in the realm of spoken language and, Saussure argued, in human cognition. Only together do the signifier and the signified form what Saussure defined as a ‘sign’ – a fundamental unit of thinkable, expressible knowledge that can be used to transmit meaning from one interlocutor to another.

Charles S. Peirce, a nineteenth-century mathematician and logician from New England, built on Saussure’s ideas to theorize the nature of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In his writing, he
articulated three different means by which a signifier and signified can be linked. He defined, therefore, three different kinds of signs that convey meaning in three distinct ways: ‘icon,’ in which the signifier and the signified are connected through a resemblance; ‘index,’ in which the signifier has an existential relationship with the signified (for example, a weather vein points in the direction of the wind, but is also physically turned by the wind; an index finger can indicate by pointing, but the finger must be pointing at the thing it is indicating in order to be meaningful); and ‘symbol,’ in which the connection between the signifier and the signified object is arbitrary, linked only by the culturally accepted association between the two.

In this theoretical language, the act of extracting meaning from an image can be described as follows: A viewer looks at an image—say, a photograph of a protestor in Kyiv preparing to launch a Molotov cocktail at an unknown target. The viewer interprets that image by considering what the visual signified being seen may represent. The viewer asks questions like What does this image look like? Where I have I seen similar images before? How does this image make me feel? How is the text surrounding this image telling me to interpret what I see? The viewer taps into their repertoire of cultural and experiential knowledge in order to create a comprehensible, articulable concept in their mind of what is being looked at. Different sets of cultural knowledge, different experiences, and different levels of fluency in the semiotic systems used by professional image-makers (illustrators, photographers, etc.) can dramatically alter the nature of the meaning.

Whether or not any sign can be truly “arbitrary” is a matter of much debate (c.f. Benveniste, 1971), but that is an argument for another paper.
extracted from any image. Meaning, therefore, is always constructed by the viewer.

It is important to recognize the flexibility inherent in the meaning of images to successfully unpack how imitation can be used in information warfare, especially since we are inclined to fall prey to the myth of photographic objectivity—the commonly held idea that photographs constitute an objective and unmediated representation of reality. This, of course, is self-evidently false. All images are crafted in some way or another: the size of the frame limits what gets captured; the chosen depth of field forces the viewer’s focus onto particular elements in the frame; exposure, lighting, shutter speed, even the context in which the image is displayed can influence the meanings that the viewer extracts from the image. Even something as simple as a written caption can dramatically alter the interpretation of visual media. This is what gives the myth of photographic objectivity so much power. All viewers lay eyes upon the same iconic “signifier” (i.e. the image in the photograph), fueling the belief that they have access to the identical information; however, their analytical minds will not necessarily attach the same meaning to that image. They see the same signifier, but not necessarily the same sign.

In imitation-based efforts of informational warfare carried out during Maidan and in the conflicts in Crimea and Donbas that followed, this belief in the concrete representation of photographic images and films was deliberately exploited for political purposes. Viewers were coached to believe that they saw, for example, grassroots self-defense brigades in Crimea. This sometimes worked, as the images audiences were presented
with showed groups that look quite a lot like what they came to recognize as self-defense brigades on the Maidan. Narratives are presented by the images makers as true not because they are true, but because they look to be true. This rhetorical move exploits the fluidity of what Roland Barthes calls “the third meaning” of images (Barthes, 1978) by granting the appearance of legitimacy to politically motivated claims. Though these claims cannot be fully evidenced (because they are not true), they accomplish their goals by generating faith in a false objectivity of the image (a false significance, to borrow Barthes’ term). They are able to insert a new, purposefully crafted truth without dislodging the viewer’s faith in the truth of the image, itself.

**Image and Imitation**

The symbolic universe of Maidan, the system of signs and meanings that brought the protest movement to life in the minds of its supporters, produced new styles of language, humor, ritual— a massive body of Maidan-specific lore. Sociologist Olexander Shulga has assessed that lore to be so rich and influential that it was able to fill a “symbolic vacuum” that had plagued Ukraine for more than 20 years. Maidan, Shulga argues, offered “a single matrix of meta meanings recognized by the majority of society” in a nation where such a matrix was long missing (Shulga, 2015, p. 231). Nataliya Bezborodova, who as extensively analyzed the linguistic and visual ephemera that circulated among Russian and Ukrainian speaking circles of Maidan supporters on social media, has characterized that lore as rooted in a fundamentally binary perspective of the conflict (2016). Maidan, in this view,
was a universe defined by opposing sides: us vs. them; protesters vs. the government. Representing this binary opposition through humor, criticism, or ritual allowed activists and supporters to forge new subjectivities within this new symbolic universe, “formulat[ing] who they are and who they are not, how they see them selves and the opposing side...” (Bezborodova, 2016, p. 128). Within this matrix of binaries, activities designed to spread disinformation through imitation seem almost ready-made, as it provides nefarious actors with the ability to deceptively flip-flop across the boundaries of those oppositional identities. Perhaps this is what made mimicry such a regular tactic as these political conflicts swept the nation.

The earliest and most obvious effort to imitate the iconicity of the Maidan protests was the production (and I do mean “production” in the theatrical sense of the word) of a pro-government rally and camp in Mariinsky Park, a green space located near major national government buildings within walking distance of the Maidan. This was a classic “Astroturf” or “fake grassroots” movement, with orchestrated gatherings posed as spontaneous public events. The Party of Regions, the political party that put Yanokovych into office, sponsored the transportation of hundreds, if not thousands, of persons from eastern and southern Ukraine into Kyiv to participate in this on-going counter protest, which soon came to be called AntiMaidan (“Maidan 2.0,” 2013). These AntiMaidan rallies were produced as deliberate forgeries of the Maidan protests. Flags and banners were carried by AntiMaidan participants throughout the park, resembling those carried on the Maidan. Stickering campaigns were undertaken, if unenthusiastically, around the park, similar in style and content to the varieties of stickers
printed and tagged around the center of Kyiv by Maidan supporters. Organized efforts to provide AntiMaidan protestors with hot meals mimicked the output Maidan’s kitchens,

Center and Right: Food preparation and distribution for EuroMaidan activists in Kyiv City Hall (center, taken December 5, 2013) and Independence Square (right, taken December 4, 2013). Photos by author.

though they provided simple, lackluster foods like boiled buckwheat, which appeared dry and dull next to the rich soups and stews that were prepared for activists on the Maidan.

Toward the end of January 2014, interactions between police and protesters in Kyiv turned deadly. In response, Maidan activists began organizing themselves into regimented self-defense brigades, which also became the subject of politically motivated imitation. Mostly male volunteers— but some female volunteers as well—formed tactical units and established clear chains of command across the other brigades. The overarching communication structure employed by Maidan self-defense was rooted in the existing hierarchical structure of the nationalist group Pravy Sektor. Though they were able to act independently, clearly defined
chains of command across groups allowed the brigades to act in a coordinated fashion, covering different barricades on across shifts and combining forces to protect the camp when the streets turned violent. Each of these units was responsible for outfitting themselves. This meant that most brigades worked together to collect uniforms, purchase helmets and limb protection, and construct large shields meant to be used in phalanx form to push back walls of oncoming police officers. Though these brigades were composed of ordinary men, many of whom lived in the Kyiv area, I never once saw a brigade in uniform or travelling together outside of the barricades, despite living less than 2km from the camp and passing through the city center regularly.

The deceptive imitation of Maidan self-defense groups began on the night of February 6, 2014. Late that evening a group of five or six men were photographed by journalists from the newspaper Segodnya as they vandalized several prominent Kyiv businesses in the middle of the night. These photographs were published with a short report on the vandalism. These men were dressed in dark colors or in camouflage. They wore balaclavas on their faces and simple helmets on their heads. They carried baseball bats and other homemade truncheons in one hand and shields made of
plywood in the other. Some had sewn patches to their clothing, which bore the trident from the coat of arms of Ukraine, stitched out in the red and black colors often associated with Western Ukrainian nationalist organizations, such as Pravy Sektor. This group of men targeted two restaurants, smashing windows and spray-painting slogans like “Revolution!” and “Glory to the Nation!” on the walls of the buildings. According to the reports published, these men did not resist being photographed while committing these crimes.
At first blush, this might appear to be a Maidan self-defense brigade gone rogue. The group bears many of the markings of Maidan protestors: camouflage, body armor, hard hats, homemade riot shields, and nationalist insignias sewn into their clothing. The construction of these costumes was incredibly precise. However, a closer look at these images reveals this explanation to be implausible. First and foremost, their clothes were too clean. At the height of the violence in January and February, Maidan was coated in dirty ice, mud, oil, grease from burnt rubber, and all kinds of soot. Even while volunteers worked diligently to keep the interiors of the Ukrainian House and Trade Union building clean, the Maidan, itself, was filthy, as were the people who spent weeks on end living there. It is simply
too improbable that an entire group of self-defense volunteers would be caught together, all of them all at once fresh from the laundry, presenting themselves as Maidan supporters so far outside the protective barricades of the protest camps. Second, their clothing was grossly inadequate for the task of serving as self-defense volunteers. This gang was poorly dressed for spending long stretches out in the cold, snowy winter. No less than two of them men seen vandalizing buildings are wearing canvas sneakers—clean, white canvas sneakers. The standard footwear for self-defense brigades was leather boots, preferably steel toe, to keep feet warm and protect against injury. Furthermore, this gang’s equipment was cheap and constructed without any attention to detail. Real Maidan self-defense volunteers put a great deal of care and effort into their gear. Some clearly benefitted from a member who had access to a metal shop, all sporting immaculate replicas of the body shields used by the Berkut, clearly homemade but of extremely high quality nonetheless. Even brigades with more modest means—including those who made shields from wood—took great care with these items. They were shaped, sanded, decorated, strengthened where strength was needed, padded at points of bodily contact; they were thoroughly and thoughtfully designed. In contrast, the shields carried by these nighttime vandals were flimsy—nothing more than an unfinished sheet of plywood with a strap stapled to the back.

Given these inconsistencies—as well as the fact that it was highly unusual to see a self-defense brigade away from the Maidan—the only reasonable conclusion is that these men were impostors. It is unclear who they were or who, if anyone, had sponsored them. Their technique,
however, is transparent to the trained eye. Since these men were out on the streets very late at night, when there would be almost no one passing by to observe their destructive activities, the capture and circulation of photographs was likely goal of their vandalism. Presumably this was an attempt to reduce trust in anti-government groups and stoke public fear of Maidan self-defense brigades. This theory is supported by the captions with which the photographs were published. A reprint in the paper *Ukrainska Pravda*, for example, printed these images with the phrase “the suspects again allow themselves to be photographed.” It was a poor attempt to mimic a Maidan self-defense brigade, because the embodiment of the characters being played was poor; nevertheless, it kept the visual image of self-defense volunteers at the forefront of the public imagination, all the while making claims that they were dangerous, radical young men who sought to bring harm to the city and its residents.

As the winter progressed towards spring, and the conflict shifted from Kyiv to Crimea and the Donbas region, the imitation of paramilitary tactics used at Maidan for the sake of political messaging continued. First, in late February 2014, large numbers of well-outfitted yet unmarked soldiers, later identified by Vladimir Putin’s own statements as members of the Russian military (Russia Today, 2014a), appeared in Crimea, setting the stage for the eventual annexation of the peninsula. In the first few weeks of this anonymous occupation, while the rest of the world was left to speculate about these soldiers’ origins, Putin declared the so-called “Little Green Men” keeping Crimea under military control to be not Russian troops but “local self-defense forces” (Chappell and Memmott, 2014). The Russian
news channel RT, which is well known for its soft propaganda campaigns carried out in the service of the Kremlin (Ioffe, 2010), covered the activities of these “self-defense units” with enthusiasm, describing the recruits as “ordinary civilians wanting to protect their families. All are volunteers. All are from Crimea” (Russia Today, 2014b).

In the subsequent month, these so-called self-defense forces expanded to include what appeared to be local men as well. Men in street clothes were photographed standing in front of local administration buildings holding homemade riot shields resembling those used by volunteers at Maidan—a clear attempt to imitate the iconography of Maidan self-defense brigades in a new setting for new purposes. Video taken by RT show these new recruits standing at makeshift barricades and block posts. These constructions were far cries from those built at the Maidan in Kyiv, most of them obviously flimsy or ineffective in their structure, but they were attempts to evoke the image of defensive barricades nonetheless.
This same tactic of presenting poor imitations of self-defense brigades in the media, facsimiles modeled after the brigades that formed in Kyiv several months prior, was also carried out in Donbas during the early
days of the separatist crisis. This mimicry ramped up quickly as agitators began destabilizing the area. Local men dressed in a variety of fatigues and balaclavas were recruited to stand guard at hastily constructed block posts along the highways. These same men lined up to ‘protect’ local administration buildings, and/or occupy them as the appointed staff from regional governments were forced out. Interestingly, paramilitary recruits in the separatist-controlled regions also made heavy use of barricades and block-posts, even (or, perhaps, especially) in places where they were of no strategic military use. Sandbags were piled up, barbed wire erected, and piles of debris were collected into shoddy, improvisational barriers.

It is of particular interest to this analysis that separatists in Donbas made heavy use of car tires in their construction of these roadblocks and barricades. Such tires were an important and incredibly prolific icon of the Maidan revolution. Self-defense brigades on the Maidan strategically stacked and ignited car tires to serve as barricades or as smoke screens in areas where police aggression was the most forceful. The use of smoke screens was a known tactic commonly used by Soviet military forces (cf. http://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm100-2-1.pdf), and their use on the Maidan has generally been attributed to the influence of veterans from the Afghan War, who visibly offered their support to protesters following the first violent police attacks in late November 2013. Protesters have used tires for these purposes in other protests in places as far reaching as Bangkok and Syria. However, the use of tires for building smokescreens in Ukraine during
Civil unrest was largely emergent at the Maidan protests. This was a strategic innovation that made use of a familiar tactic in a novel situation.

In Donbas, tires were also incorporated into the construction of barricades. In some cases, blockades were constructed out of nothing but piles of tires draped in barbed wire, to prevent anyone from climbing over them. Sometimes, tires and sandbags were used together to construct walls in highly visible areas in city centers. Often, these constructions became impromptu billboards for the posting of slogans and images in support of the separatist narrative. Often, tires made appearances that were largely symbolic, appearing one or two at a time along roadblocks, punctuating the
domain of armed, masked men in homemade paramilitary uniform with this new and potent symbol of popular uprisings. Whatever their ultimate utility for anti-Ukrainian fighters in Donbas, tires were treated as though they were a necessary element of blockades, despite the fact that tires make an awkward and expensive construction material. This did not deter barricade builders in the separatist region, however, as the purpose of the tires was clearly not mechanical but symbolic. They were deployed a sign of a serious grassroots movement that sought to resist government control; they imitated the barricades at the Maidan in order to evoke the symbolism of the Maidan.

Separatist barricades in Donetsk.
SAME SIGNIFIERS, NEW SIGNIFIEDS

The *Information-Psychological War Operation* reference guide, cited by Pomerantsev, defines two major approaches to psychological warfare. The first, “recognizes the primacy of objects in the world,” spinning the interpretation of those objects in one way or another; the second approach “puts information before objects,” seeking to disrupt the public’s engagement with evidentiary logic, creating “a linguistic sabotage of the infrastructure of reason” (Pomerantsev, 2015). The claims levied against the Maidan revolution and, later, against the post-Maidan government in Kyiv through acts of imitation engaged both of these approaches simultaneously. The concreteness—the “truth” of objects shown—is automatically centered in the art of the photograph. The myth of photographic objectivity tells us that this is so. At the same time, these imitations also produced signifiers that emerged from the revolution and dislodged their original meanings. Familiar images were translated into a different context, modified slightly, twisted just enough to push back on the protesters’ claims about what was happening in Kyiv—all without seeming overtly fallacious or implausible.

Consider, first, what the AntiMaidan protests in Mariinsky Park sought to imitate. The Maidan protests were framed by participating activists as an organic, truly grassroots movement. The politics of the revolution were, broadly speaking, Anti-Yanukovych and pro-EU (or at least pro- the prioritization of building EU relations through Ukrainian foreign and domestic policy). At their core, however, the rallies, the flags, the performances, the participation of citizens across social classes, even the
volunteer self-defense efforts—all of these striking visuals connected back to a single object, a single signified: the imagined community of the “Ukrainian People” as a whole (Carroll, 2016). By opposing itself to the presidential regime of Viktor Yanukovych, and by enacting (or, in the case of the barricades, literally constructing) its defenses against the Berkut forces that Yanukovych controlled, the protesters effectively crafted a narrative of binary opposition, of Us vs. Them, wherein “they” are the government and “we” are The People, the driving force of the nation, which the government is morally obligated to serve and protect.

When the AntiMaidan protests first came together, many of the same visual codes were produced in an attempt to signify an authentic grassroots movement: the crowds in the field, the flags and banners they flew, even the modest meals and other forms of sustenance on which the protesters dined. AntiMaidan was a clumsy imitation of a grassroots movement; it was apparent that the Party of Regions had orchestrated the gatherings in an entirely top down fashion, managing every element from the transportation to and from the park to the brigade of soup cookers to the uniform printed pro-government ribbons and arm bands that participants wore on their sleeves. Nevertheless, the outward appearance of a grassroots effort was the desired effect, crafted for the purpose of displacing the core object, the core signified, represented by the Maidan protests: the imagined community of the Ukrainian people. AntiMaidan reproduced the symbolism of the revolution to communicate that, yes, these activities are, indeed, the product of a true “people's movement.” However, per these new claims, The People are not represented by Maidan;
the true movement of the Ukrainian people can be found down the street at Mariinsky Park.

Similar displacements of signified objects guided the mimicry of self-defense brigades as well. On the Maidan, self-defense brigades came to represent the living manifestation of contemporary Ukrainian nationalism. Much of the symbolism engaged by self-defense brigades and their supporters made reference to historically significant forms of nationalism associated with the Ukrainian activist and militant Stepan Bandera, which continues to proliferate in the western region of Halychyna. This is a form of nationalism that evokes, for many, historical memory of violent politics and racially motivated killings. However, as I and others have argued (Carroll, 2014; Kvit, 2014), the reproduction of these symbols on the Maidan was, more often than not, undertaken not to promote an ethnically charged form of nationalism, but to narrativize the sacrifices made by the self-defense volunteers, to depict them as the heroes of an internal conflict that had drawn the Ukrainian people together in mutual service. Through these semiotic means, the brigades, and the iconic imagery of fatigues, helmets, and shields that visually defined them, came to represent self-actualization, defiance in the face of oppression, and honorable yet dangerous service to the nation. These volunteers were offering themselves for the protection of the people (protecting “us”) from a violent government (from “them”)—from a very clear and present danger.

When imposter self-defense volunteers engaged in highly visible displays of vandalism outside of the Maidan encampments in Kyiv, the intent, again, was to produce an honest (or, at least, an honest enough)
depiction of a Maidan self-defense brigade, colored in the signs and symbols of a historically recognizable Ukrainian nationalist paramilitary outfit. However, these men did not play the role of protectors; they played the role of violent perpetrators, of young hooligans excited by wanton violence and destruction. Rather than an organized force working to protect The People, they portrayed themselves as a radical unit that sought to disrupt and even attack The People—to attack “us.” The intended message was that Maidan self-defense brigades were, indeed, collections of young men inspired by Banderist nationalism; yet, these new claims tapped into the historical narratives that remember those Banderist philosophies as violent and dangerous. This mimicry sought to ensure the viewer that self-defense volunteers were who they said they were, and that is why they should be feared, not trusted or celebrated. In fact, a popular anti-Maidan narrative held that those who sought to remove Yanukovych from office were, in fact, militant neo Nazis who sought to incite ethnic violence in Ukraine (Weiss, 2015), and the physical appearance of the self-defense brigades served as excellent fodder for advancing this theory.

In contrast, when Maidan self-defense brigades were imitated in Crimea and Donbas, the symbolic meaning visually communicated by images of these “volunteers” shifted to levy a different set of claims altogether. In both of these locations, and especially in Crimea, self-defense units were portrayed as dedicated, honorable locals who sought to defy oppressive forces—as men who were committed to defending their homeland against an outside aggressors who would forcibly control or oppress them. The difference, this time, was that the outside aggressor was
the post-Maidan Ukrainian government, and The People, the “us” deserving of protection, was again shifted from the crowds in Kyiv to the local residents of the Crimean region. Similarly, the use of tires in Donbas mimicked this specific signifier in order to draw on the emotional indices of Maidan. On the Maidan, tires came to symbolize many of the most positive and celebrated elements of the revolution; they represented the contribution of Ukrainians from all social and financial backgrounds. They represented a successful, self-made mobilization against violence. They represented the ability to protect oneself and one’s community. In Donbas, these abstract meanings were also invoked by the strategic display of tires, even where tires, in the material sense, were not strategically appropriate or helpful.

These deliberate imitations would not have been effective—or even possible—had the visual imagery they copied not already been well established and quite familiar to the public. The language of Saussure is helpful in explaining why. When visual images of Maidan began circulating across both journalistic and social media, these visual codes, these iconic signifiers, took on meaning not only in broad public discourse but also in the imaginations of the individual members of the public. In other words, when the visual signifiers depicting different elements of the Maidan protests circulated, an associated signified (a meaning) of those icons, of the protests or of the protesters themselves, became associated and subsequently evoked in the minds of the viewers. This allowed the public to “think” Maidan, to move new categories of human action, political narrative, and social distinction into their cognition.
In parallel fashion, the recycling of the same visual signifiers through imitation assured that viewers would have a pre-existing signified to which they could anchor their understanding of this new visual material. This is why counter claims did not need to be sophisticated. They did not even need to make sense from a logical point of view. They simply needed to successfully evoke pre-conceived, comprehensible meanings in their viewers’ minds and then plug up the gaps in that mental image, tweaking small elements of that understanding to serve ulterior purposes. In this way, authors of this mimicry can be assured that their imitations are comprehensible to their audiences and that the desired meaning will be conveyed. They can even be confident that these narratives will feel somewhat “natural” by virtue of the fact that they are engaging pre-existing cognitive categories that have already been integrated into viewers’ worldview.

This mode of informational warfare through imitation can be thought of as a semiotic slight of hand. The iconic similarities between the original and the imitative visual images are exploited in order to evoke previously associated objects and meanings, to blur the division between the new and old signifiers and, by extension, between the meanings (the signifieds) conveyed by each. Yet, by placing that new signifier into a different context, depicting rallies with a different political orientation, showing self-defense volunteers doing things they are not supposed to do or in different places dealing with different conflicts, these imitations shift the indexical meaning of these signifiers. By this, I am referring to the signified meanings that have existential relationships with their signifiers: they
influence one another; they shape one another; they co-occur; they are tied to our emotional responses; they are tied to a specific time and place.

Thus, imitation attaches new meanings to old signifiers, so to speak. Elements of truth are cherry picked from the signs being imitated and are carefully transplanted into new iterations that look like the same thing. “Yes, this is what it looks like when The People rise up, but these are The True People over here in Mariinsky Park; those protesters in Maidan are fascists.” “Yes, self-defense brigades in Kyiv are Ukrainian nationalists. That is why you should be afraid of them.” “Of course, self-defense brigades will form when a dignified people are threatened by an intolerable aggressor. That's exactly what happened in Crimea, and what is happening still in Donbas.” These twists are simple, but they are also effective. In part, this helps illuminate why misinformation through imitation is such a successfully divisive tactic. Either the new, propagandistic meaning is successfully transmitted and the original values assigned to an image are framed as fraudulent, or the mimicry is seen for what it is, the original signifieds are not displace, and the counter narrative is seen as a farce. In other words, this strategy is either going to work very well, or it is not going to work at all. There is no in between, and divergent audiences are left with little common ground

THE PATTERN CONTINUES...
Though the AntiMaidan movement may have been an artificial production of a now defunct regime, and though we may never know who sponsored the imposter self-defense volunteers in Kyiv or the tire-lined barricades in Donbas, the semiotic slight-of-hand described in this article is worthy of ongoing scholarly attention, as it remains a key tool in Russia's international propaganda experiment. This tactic still appears in both official and unofficial Russian media channels. RT (Russian Today), arguably the dominant foreign mouth piece of the Russian government for the English speaking world, has made a general practice of exploiting iconic similarities between images in order to drag the larger emotional and political meaning—the indexical meanings—of those images into their preferred narrative frame. Journalist Christopher Miller, who has covered the Crimean annexation and the war in Donbas extensively for the Kyiv Post and Mashable, has described this rhetorical move as the creation of “whataboutisms,” noting that this method was particularly prevalent in Russian reporting of the civil unrest in the U.S. cities of Ferguson and Baltimore in 2015 (Miller, 2015a). Miller has also published a collection of
screenshots from RT’s video program entitled “In the Now,” which depict iconically similar photographic images of Kyiv’s Maidan protests and from Baltimore’s 2015 unrest side by side. The goal of these broadcasts, overtly stated, was to highlight so-called hypocrisy of the U.S. government, allegedly evidenced by the presidential administration’s different responses to the two events. RT’s image collage suggests, by means of the myth of photographic objectivity, they these events are, in fact, equivalent. As Miller reported, the host of RT’s “In the Now,” Anissa Naouai, made the following statement as the images were being aired: “Maidan versus Maryland. Don’t let the media decide. Not even us. You can see for yourselves. The similarities—well, they speak for themselves” (Miller, 2015a). Here, the use of familiar signifieds to generate new, politically motivated meaning in the viewers’ minds is overt.

Through unofficial channels, this rhetorical move has been taken up with creative abandon. For example, Twitter user @Afromaydan, a play on words that joins the name Maidan with a reference to people of black African ancestry, has been a prolific generator of Internet memes critical of the U.S. government. These memes carry meaning by altering indexical references and exploiting iconic similarities—informational warfare by means of imitation. Two illustrative examples of this stylized mimicry can be found in the Twitter user’s posts dating from April 28 and 29, 2015, during the height of the civil unrest in Baltimore. One post contains two edited images (each with a seemingly violent protestors crudely pasted into the image to appear as though they
are attacking riot police) side by side. The photo on the left is labeled “Maidan, 2014.” It is accompanied by a quote from Barack Obama, which reads, “We strongly advise everyone to respect the right to peaceful protest in Ukraine.” The photo on the right is labeled “Baltimore, 2015.” Under this title, a different quote from Barack Obama appears: “The marauders in Baltimore must be considered criminals. The violence had nothing to do with peaceful protests.” The implication of the meme is that President Obama has responded differently, and therefore hypocritically, to each of these events despite the allegedly obvious fact (signaled by the iconic similarities between the two images) that these events are substantively equivalent. This technique has also been engaged for seemingly humorous (though clearly racist) purposes, as can be seen in the April 28 meme that shows the face of a Black man superimposed onto a portrait of a well-known separatist fighter in Donetsk with the nomme de guerre “Babay” or
“Boogeyman.” The caption reads “Boogeyman 2.0 – Baltimore, rebooted somewhere in the Baltimore People’s Republic.” The implication seems to be that the legitimate demands for civil rights being made by African-American residents in Baltimore are equivalent in type and in legitimacy to those made by separatist forces in Donetsk.

![Meme](https://twitter.com/Afromaydan/status/593343320996249600)

A meme containing digitally-altered images, posted by twitter user @Afromaydan on April 29, 2015. On the left, Barack Obama is quoted saying, “We strongly advise everyone to respect the right to peaceful protest in Ukraine.” On the right, the quote reads, “Marauders in Baltimore must be considered criminals. The violence had nothing to do with peaceful protests.”

Furthermore, soon after public attention on the Maidan revolution and Ukraine’s war in the Donbas region waned, Russian television channels transitioned from constant coverage of Ukraine to exclusive reporting from the conflict in Syria (Miller, 2015b; Weiss, 2015). Policy analyst Edward Lucas offered the following interpretation of this change:

The first target in all this is Russian public opinion. The soap opera in Ukraine is over. The heroic separatists, their evil fascist foes, and the cynical Western meddlers have been retired. The new entertainment is a
thrilling and exotic epic set in Syria, with the Assad regime as the heroic defenders of civilized values, Russian [sic] their valiant allies and the West as the defenders of jihadist barbarians. (Politico Magazine, 2015)


https://twitter.com/Afromaydan/status/593138946655162369

In short, the careful crafting of narrative is again underway, and with so much of the Russian government’s media resources directed towards online video and television publications, we can be confident that visual imagery will be central to these narrative campaigns and this method of semiotic slight of hand will continue to be in the Russian propaganda playbook.

What is more, since this technique of information warfare relies on the ability of images to invoke pre-existing concepts and narratives in the minds of the viewer, these imitations necessarily tap into widely shared elements of Eastern European culture and the lived experience of Russian
and Ukrainian people today. These campaigns both *create* locally relevant cultural artifacts and *are* locally relevant culturally artifacts, themselves. It is therefore important for cultural and political scholars of Russia and the post-Soviet sphere more broadly to watch closely as these techniques proliferate. The more propagandistic images are produced, the more the authors of these images reveal about the ideology that shapes the rhetoric of these images and, by extension, the worldview from which they are conjured.
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