The Eternal Flame and Fried Eggs

Irina Perianova, Sofia, Bulgaria

Kenneth Burke described the human being as a symbol-*making*, symbol-*using* and symbol-*misusing* animal. It means that on the one hand, our attitudes are all influenced and 'deflected' by the symbols that we make, use and misuse and on the other hand, at the same time **we are also used by these symbols.** In this paper I would like to highlight some of the ways symbols are devised and designed by their creators, and interpreted, reinvented and judged by other political animals. In other words, my goal is to analyse some recent instances of symbolic patterning and creative symbol-making and their cognitive frames.

According to John Lakoff's theory, (1980; 1992) metaphor, as a conceptual category which structures human perception, no matter whether it is a word, a gesture or a cultural custom, should be regarded as the link between language and culture. And as Gregory Bateson (1979) argued, the entire world, both conscious and unconscious, is made up of patterns that connect. What follows is an almost unlimited freedom of interpretation/reinvention. As Humpty Dumpty in Alice in the Wonderland famously said, -"When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean." And, not unlike fractals, new symbolic images are apt to appear in the most unlikely combinations.

It seems appropriate to start with what I have chosen as the title of my paper – the eternal flame. Its symbolism spans centuries and countries. For Zoroastrian fire-worshippers and in many countries now, it is a holy sign of remembrance, a monument to heroes, in most cases unknown soldiers, who have tragically died to save their homeland. Monuments of this kind exist in Russia and many other places in Europe, in USA and Australia, in India, Mexico, Japan Philippines, Israel, Central Asian Republics, as well as three places in Africa - in Ghana, Pretoria and Zimbabwe. Yet, in spring 2011 in Ukraine the eternal flame was used as a symbol of remembrance with a difference by one Anna Sinkova, aged 21, a member of radical youth movement called The Brotherhood of St. Lucas. Anna Sinkova used the Eternal Fire in Kiev to fry eggs and sausages. In her interpretation these culinary activities were meant to draw attention to the plight of the impoverished veterans and old people who could barely survive on their meager pensions in the former Soviet Republic and who would soon have to queue up in front of this flame to cook food because they will have nowhere to live and nothing to cook on. Her act was interpreted as blasphemous and sacrilegious by authorities as well as by many members of the public and punished by a long stint in jail. The police opened a criminal case on the desecration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Kyiv based on a relevant video posted online. Anna Sinkova had some followers. On June 20, 2011 three young men who introduced themselves as activists of the Egg Art Group, also fried eggs on the eternal flame in the Park of Glory in protest "against lawlessness of the authorities and officials." The activists expressed support to Sinkova, who was in the detention facility at that time. Thus the eternal flame found a new use in Ukraine - as a cooking facility to mark real or perceived protest, or as a means of attention-seeking, depending on the interpretation. Symbolic actions of this type are intended to shock and their interpretation may be random. On the one hand, these discrete acts are proscribed by the powers that be as insensitive provocation and desecration of the symbols of honour,

adulation or worship, whilst on the other - they are transposed as protest against the status quo: old symbols are projected as perceived to be more important than living people.

Indexical Analogy

I called the first type of patterning **indexical analogy**. A relevant example would be the symbol, familiar in many countries as a sign of disapproval - the middle finger. In many cultures/ societies middle finger is often interpreted as a phallic symbol and regarded as an insult. This sign however may take on a slightly different and more concrete meaning, for instance, that of protest. In early 2013 in Pavlodar (Kazakhstan) a young man showed his middle finger to a cortege of the Speaker of the Kazakh senate and was arrested. Immediately, the sign which referred to an isolated incident was adopted as a symbol of political protest against the authoritarian acts of the government. (http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2013/01/130121_kazakhstan_middle_finger.shtml).

The press office of the Pavlodar administrative court described the action as an insult to the human dignity of a public personality, i.e. the Speaker of the Senate, and by extension - a disorderly act signifying disrespect of the public at large. The new protest symbol which was thus born is based on a reference to a discrete act, and the perception of the act reflected a sequential chain of events. Indexical analogies are by no means uncommon. At the same time, banning symbols is likely to trigger off creativity of the opposition in unpredictable ways. In occupied France during WWII a certain form of knocking was invented which people would use in cafes and bistros to suggest to other pro-resistance Frenchmen and women that Nazis were hated there, whereas in Belorussia, for several years now, people have been struggling against authorities by means of public applause.

Syntagmatic analogy

This sequential patterning technique makes use of the analogy in different familiar relationships, such as between objects and what they serve for. Scissors, for example, represent a cause and effect relationship and an easy familiar transcultural symbol to interpret – as protest against job losses and pay cuts. Cleaning utensils, such as mops and brooms, as well as rolls of toilet paper regularly left near the Bulgarian Parliament or thrown at Bulgarian MPs are also not hard to decode.

A more complicated metonymical pattern is represented by Pussy Riot, perpetrators of one of the best known acts of protest in this century (below).

Unsurprisingly, the punkers' act was differently perceived by the group sympathizers and by the butts of their protest. Actually, the target of their political satire, which would barely raise an eyebrow in the West, was the cozy alliance between Putin and the clergy, and Putin's authoritarian clampdown on dissent. This is why the content of the song, the lyrics of which read: *Mother of God, Virgin Mary Chase Putin away*, made church a logical protest venue for the group. Whereas Amnesty International regards the punkers as prisoners of conscience those who object to the symbolic treatment of the act call it blasphemy and sacrilege. Immediately, the visual image of the group turned into **a second degree symbol** of protest, and as a knock-on effect the media started talking about Pussy-riot-style trials. In 2012 such trials took place in several countries: Turkey, Kazakhstan and even the UK.

In October 2012 a top Turkish pianist and composer appeared in court in Istanbul during what was often described as a pussy-riot-style trial to defend himself against charges of offending Muslims and insulting Islam in comments he made on Twitter. Fazil Say, who has played with the New York Philharmonic, the Berlin Symphony Orchestra and others, was on trial for sending tweets that included one in April that joked about a call to prayer that lasted only 22 seconds. Say tweeted: 'Why such haste? Have you got a mistress waiting or a raki on the table?' Raki is a traditional alcoholic drink made with aniseed. Islam forbids alcohol and many Islamists consider such remarks unacceptable. (http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/18/turkish-pianist-fazil-say-islam)

Kazakhstan had its pussy-riot moment also in October 2012 when an opposition leader Vladimir Kozlov, leader of the unregistered Alga! Party, received a seven-and-a-half-year prison term and an order seizing his assets, including those registered in his name for his party. A vocal critic of Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kozlov was found guilty of attempting to overthrow the state and of involvement in the deadly unrest. To prove Kozlov's guilt, prosecutors relied on circumstantial evidence and resorted to tactics such as calling an expert

witness who testified that the opposition politician was a "bohemian personality". (http://www.turkishjournal.net/index.php/turkic-world.html)

Moreover, parallels with Pussy riot trial were drawn for a rather different trial in England. On April 7, 2012 when Trenton Oldfield, a 36-year-old Australian, swam into the path of the 158th Oxford-Cambridge boat race, he received a few laughs but little sympathy. The swimmer claimed he was protesting against elitism and inequality but to most his actions appeared naive and reckless — at least until he was jailed earlier this month and became what the English press described as an unlikely martyr. 'To some observers, Oldfield began to look like the British equivalent of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot, who were sentenced to hard labour for their larky cathedral protest. Britain is obviously not Russia but then again perhaps delaying the Varsity boat race is our equivalent of blasphemy." (www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/parallels-between-trenton)

What these different Pussy-riot style trials had in common was that their instigators called the acts blasphemy and sacrilege using the same semantic clusters. In this way, through their rhetoric the authorities opposed the recognition of the symbolic nature of the act and condemned the perpetrators **for the actual deed** which was thus given media coverage as a crime per se. Nevertheless, there are some notable differences in the approach taken in different countries. In Turkey, as in Russia, the act was played up as religious blasphemy whereas in Kazakhstan it was talking in public against authorities that was regarded as a sacrilegious crime. Of course, it may be argued that the same hidden meaning underlies the Russian trial. In England though, the judge was emphatic that Trenton's action could not be construed as protest against elitism – he had just prevented people from having a good time. The transculturality of the rhetoric, the antagonism represented in the use of the words *blasphemy* and *sacrilege* rings intercultural bells – both for the advocates and for the opponents of the trials. The symbol thus has become personified with the **symbol-makers** themselves turning into a symbol.

It would be of interest to highlight how the governments manipulatively misinterpret the co-incidental symbolic acts in order to redirect and rechannel protests. During his meeting with Angela Merkel (16.11.2012), for instance, Mr. Putin accused some members of the Pussy Riot group of anti-Semitism saying that during a certain event they had hung an effigy of a Jew. Pyotr Verzilov, Tolokonnikova's husband and a founder of Voina, however, pointed out that the performance had been meant to draw attention to bias in Moscow against minority groups. He claimed that the event had been intended to symbolize something totally different – the necessity to eradicate intolerance of minorities. Many workers from Central Asian Republics, a target of hate for skinheads, were taking part. Apparently, the symbol of hanging and its description in terms of anti-Semitism, a sensitive issue for the Germans, was a deliberate set-up because anti-Semitism is a fraught word. In general, there is no denying that the use of certain key words and images, such as 'blasphemy' is likely to precondition the audience's response. Deconstructing rhetorically the image of the antagonist is, of course, very common. What better example to illustrate Kenneth Burke's argument that we use symbols and are used by them than the imprisonment of the group's members! The antagonist's image was deconstructed not only **by word but also by deed.**

The perceived national symbols or institutions, such as the Church, national hymns and heroes, etc. provide common ground for manipulative interpretations. A case in point is the problematic title of the 2012 Bulgarian documentary, *Botev e Idiot* (Botev is an idiot) directed by Deyan Bararev. At a certain point, the title of the film which has won awards in Bulgaria had to

be changed because the film centre where the film was to be shown came under threat of attack by the so-called patriots. Actually what was read into the title as an insult to the famous Bulgarian revolutionary and poet, a household name in the country, was used as a metaphor and had nothing to do with the film director's view of Botev. Frequently, people's aspiration to be regarded as symbols turns into tragedy, as in case of many politically-motivated self-immolations – the Buddhist monks, Jan Pollach's sacrifice during the 1968 Prague revolution, Plamen Goranov suicide as protest against the corrupt city council and the mayor of Varna, Bulgaria, in February 2013, to name but a few. Their goals are often achieved – the personification of symbols is a known phenomenon.

Paradigmatic analogy.

The underlying mechanism of this technique is drawing parallels with a certain event in the past or present which happened at the same place, or elsewhere. The formation of a new symbol in this case is based on shared experience, such as collective history and its reading, and involves a shared analogical basis between the different conceptual or semantic fields, i.e. between the tenor (new) and the vehicle (the familiar). An analogy may be made between different protest movements whose protest slogans or symbols may be appropriated and their images may subsequently become transcultural. Thus, white ribbon was first used as an indexical symbolic pattern in Canada where the White Ribbon Campaign originated in the wake of a hate murder of 14 women in Montreal committed by an anti-feminist in December 1989. The campaign gradually spread to 57 countries and became related to men's support for feminist movement. Lately it extended to a different kind of protest. In 2011 the Vladimir city section of the Just Russia party distributed one hundred thousand white ribbons as a sign of protest against cancellation of the elections for the mayor of Vladimir. In a spiral of generalization the white ribbon came to signify distrust of authority and ballot rigging in Russia. (*http://www.bing.com/search?q=white+ribbon+campaign+russia&go=&qs=n&form=QBRE&pq=white+ribbon+campaign+russia&sc=0-22&sp=-1&sk=#).*

Another interesting example of this type of analogy is the poster *Death to the Kremlin Invaders* which was put up by 9th of May protesters in Moscow in 2013:

Death to the Kremlin Occupiers

To anybody with background knowledge of Russian history it echoes one of the most popular slogans of the WWWII which read *Death to the Fascist Invaders.* Despite the fact that many people, while approving the protest disapproved of its timing – the 9th of May V-day parade – undoubtedly, for the protesters, the timing signified bridging the historical gap and pinpointing a similarity in the attitude. The supporters of the protest continued the analogy after the arrest of the protesters: the judge, Alisov, who presided over the hearing of the alleged public offence was described in an *Eho Moskvi* interview as a collaborator.

Symbols based on paradigmatic analogy are only clear to those who share the same cultural knowledge. In the 1990-ies the Union of Democratic Forces in Bulgaria came up with the slogan "Кой не скача, е червен" (those who are not jumping are reds) rallying their supporters against the socialist party. The slogan caught on easily because of its rhythmic and alliterative structure. In January 2013 it was transformed into an eco-motto „кой не скача и не пее той за плажа не милее" (those who are not jumping and singing do not care about the beaches) rallying conservationists and marking a wave of green protests against overbuilding on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. Another environmental slogan in Bulgaria, reminiscent of other green protests, such as the Istanbul Teksim park read "We want nature, not concrete." It targeted what Slavoi Žižek refers to as enclosure of public spaces which he defines as a new global phenomenon typical of democracies and Islamic countries alike. (LRB 18 July 2013)

Protest images based on paradigmatic analogy abound in present-day Bulgaria, as in other countries. In July 2013 there were two notable installations that made front-page news: On Bastille day, a semi-dressed actress posing as Delacroix's Liberty, marched close to the Bulgarian Parliament carrying the Bulgarian flag. On another day, the state symbol, of Bulgaria, a lion guarding the Chamber of Justice, woke up disguised as a McDonalds clown (below)

State Symbols – Lion or Clown.
Chamber of Justice, Sofia, Bulgaria July 2013

While the two images described above echo the well-known international icons, many others are based on Bulgarian history, e.g. the Red and Bad Grannies performance below, a parody of old women described as the most vocal supporters of the Socialist party about eight or ten years ago.

Red and Bad Grannies – Bulgaria, July 2013

A wide-spread linguistic feature in protest slogans, especially of the new EU members, such as Bulgaria, is blending of the globetalk type (See Geogieva 2011). The Sofia protesters' most important slogan is probably "The world is дансingwithme is", which should also be viewed as an appeal to global support. The slogan, as well as some others, such as Plan MarchALL (МаршALL, originally). are blends of Cyrillic and Latin script, where *Marshall plan* and *march* , *dance* and the Bulgarian acronym of the powerful intelligence agency *ДАНС* join hands.

A geometric symbol of this analogy may be a loop or a spiral, a self-referential system defined by Douglas Hofstadter as a "strange loop". Hofstadter explores "strange loops" in *I am a Strange Loop*, describing them at one point as: "Not a physical circuit but an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another." (Hofstadter, 2007, pp. 101–102)

Symbol substitution – symbol vs. simulacrum

The willful manipulation of the well-known and treasured symbols may be saliently illustrated by present-day 9th May parades in Russia (see below)

Immortal regiment victory march (Personification of pictures)

The picture is not a one-off but a display of the symbolic change of an entire system. The red-letter day of the 9th of May Victory parade was one of the most important festive carnival-like occasions in the former USSR, celebrating a symbolic exchange of death for life, i.e. a type of exchange maintaining and organizing social relations and hierarchies. In general, symbolic exchanges do not aim at establishing equivalence between two exchanged tokens, as in the exchange for money for goods or services – in specie. Their main difference from other forms of

exchange is that the value of an exchanged object does not measure up to the resulting outcome. Indeed, the idea of carnival as a myth of life and death, revival and mourning was marched out of existence by regiments of the veterans' grandchildren carrying pictures of their dead grandparents – the so-called "Immortal Regiment", myth of a myth, a succession of simulacra, using Baudrillard's famous term. The endless repetition has resulted in an industrialization of memories, distancing and alienation. Consequently, the tragic war turned into an analogue of the Marlboro country in the classical cigarette advertisement – a replica without an original, a hollow echo of an echo, with black and white ribbons distributed to everyone to mark the occasion as worthless tokens of non-existent memory - similar to Moebius strips displaying form without content whereby a symbol is manipulatively turned into a simulacrum**.** There have been conspicuous other substitutions – views of the Rocky Mountains instead of the Bulgarian Rila or the Rhodopes in the Bulgarian President's 2012 New Year address on TV, or the Missouri missile carrier instead of the revolutionary Aurora battleship on billboards in the Russian capital on the eve of February Defender of the Motherland public holiday in 2013. In May 2013, instead of the picture of the flag being put up over the Reichstag another image appeared on billboards in Russia with the caption *It is Our Victory* – that of Americans raising a flag on Iwo Jima, a historic photograph taken on February 23, 1945, by Joe Rosenthal depicting five United States Marines and a United States Navy corpsman raising the American flag atop Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II, a photo-illustration of one of the most iconic moments of World War II — the raising of an American flag on Iwo Jima.

Reichstag or Iwo Jima April 2013

At the age of the Internet the mix-up does not seem surprising and would appear to indicate the conventional character of symbols. Incidentally, both flag-raisings – Reichstag and Iwo Jima are known to have been staged rather than actual events, in other words, **a performance**. Performance seems a typical feature of our age described as high modernity

(Giddens, 1990: 176) or liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). It is different from the traditional societies which have rules and conventions that constrain behavior, practice and thinking. Giddens argues that the main feature of high modernity is reflexivity – people question why things are done in particular ways. In my view this questioning is very prominent in the new symbols and the symbolic patterning which I have described**.** Ullrich Beck pointed out the practice of boundary management (2003) because at present boundaries are not set as they were previously. In his address on being awarded Dr Honoris Causa of Sofia University in June 2013 he expanded the statement pointing out that while politics and thinking are at a standstill we are looking at the global revolution of side effects which are most salient in the decline of language and the key concepts which no longer reveal anything – and you may choose what you will, in his words - an opposition between right and left parties, first and third world, differentiation between home and abroad, core and periphery or nature as opposed to society.

Perhaps the importance of performance which is seamlessly intertwined with present-day political life should be regarded as proof of Beck's theory. An appropriate illustration, which may serve as a concluding remark to this paper, is the October 2013 protest in Sofia when the students of Film and Theatre Academy in Sofia wrote the word *resignation (*ostavka) with their bodies in the centre of Sofia.

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