

Article

Visual Art and Propaganda Ecologies in the Basque Country: A Sample of *Guernica* Motifs from the Benedictine Sticker Archives (1978–1989)

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Abstract: The Benedictine Archives at Lazkao contain a multitude of propaganda stickers and related visual media that provide a snapshot of the Basque region's artful political culture in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of the most compelling examples include several items that remix Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, referencing the famous antiwar painting to become a form of mass-circulated pastiche. This move was somewhat unusual amid the strong nationalist bent of public discourse and art in the Basque Country during this period. Almost entirely unknown outside the region, these materials capture political performance during the decade-long period between the instauration of Spanish democracy (1978) and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), when separatist sentiment reached a peak in the Basque Country. This artful visual platform, rendered in the small, focused format of stickers, constitutes a useful index of rhetorical currents within the Basque Country and Spain, as well as an interesting analogue prototype of what we might call, in the twenty-first century, meme culture. Circulated in bars and other public places across the Basque region, and frequently worn upon clothing, the stickers demonstrate a propaganda principle described by Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo, whereby participants in movements of mass persuasion actively partake in the dissemination and consumption of propaganda. The stickers normally refer to very concrete events (for instance, a one-day celebration, a protest for a concrete situation, etc.). When organized on topics and themes, they create a nonlinear visual account of post-Franco Basque history, providing propaganda narratives that invite performative acts from the audience. This account documents the significance of the vast Benedictine collection for future scholars, analyzing, in detail, four stickers that employ *Guernica* in their design. It also considers several other representative items from the collections that play on other art forms, as well as pop culture, in their attempt to influence public opinion, politics, and media consumption.

Keywords: propaganda studies; *Guernica*; Spanish Civil War; Pablo Picasso; Basque Country; Basque studies; propaganda



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“All resistance is a rupture with what is. And every rupture begins, for those engaged in it, through a rupture with oneself.” (Badiou 2005, p. 7)

“Propaganda in its effects can be partial, and it need not be total.” (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013, p. 8)

The Benedictine Archives at Lazkao¹ contain a multitude of propaganda stickers and related visual media that provide a snapshot of the Basque region's artful political culture during the 1970s and 1980s. Some of the most compelling examples include a series of items that remix Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, playing on the famous antiwar painting to become a form of mass-circulated pastiche. This was somewhat unusual amid the strong nationalist bent of public discourse and art in the Basque Country during this period. Almost entirely unknown outside the region, these materials capture aspects of politicized visual culture

during the decade-long period between the instauration of Spanish democracy (1978) and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), when separatist sentiment reached a peak in the Basque Country. This artful visual platform, rendered in the small, focused format of stickers, constitutes a useful index of rhetorical currents within the Basque Country and Spain, as well as an interesting analogue prototype of what we might call, in the twenty-first century, meme culture, at least by way of analogy. Disseminated in bars and other public places across the Basque region, and frequently worn upon clothing, the stickers demonstrate a propaganda principle described by Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo, whereby participants in movements of mass persuasion become “active consumers” of propaganda (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013, p. 1). The stickers normally refer to very concrete events and issues (for instance, a one-day celebration, a timely protest for a specific situation, etc.), although they are rarely identifiable by exact dates. Yet, when organized on topics and themes, they create a nonlinear, visual account of post-Franco Basque history, providing artful narratives that invite participation from the audience.

The Benedictine collections contain tens of thousands of these stickers, which were circulated in the Basque Country during this period. In an effort to bring to light what these items may have to teach us about Basque art, culture, and history, this account documents a few highlights from the Benedictines, as well as one item from a private collector’s holdings.² It also explores what these materials have to offer to the field of propaganda studies as it relates to art, and to politics and media studies more broadly. We assume that Basque nationalism, both conservative and progressive, is based on a national romantic discourse, in which these stickers participate.³ Yet we also find in the stickers—as items that complete a series of micronarratives—how Basque nationalist discourse engages in cultural experiment (sometimes even transculturally), as well as provides an intellectual and aesthetic discourse (art, *Guernica*, etc.). Where the essentialist, residual voice does not disappear, it appears in this context as a further example of remix and the active consumption of propaganda.

1. Art and the New Propaganda Studies: Approaching the Basque Stickers Circa 2022

A crucial context for the present study is the broad awakening of new research, over the past decade or so, in the interdisciplinary field of propaganda studies. Energized in the humanities by the publication of Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo’s collection *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies* (Auerbach and Castronovo 2013), the idea of propaganda studies as a dedicated category of inquiry has sought to rehabilitate the study of forms of group or mass influence through a “functionalist” and “contextualist” framework (p. 1, Abstract). This approach presents propaganda not as a dismissive pejorative term, as it is sometimes used in both popular and scholarly discourse, but instead as “a coherent practice or set of practices,” which “lends itself to focused inquiry insofar as it possesses a distinct genesis and a rich history that helps us make sense of how information circulates today” (p. 2). Auerbach and Castronovo, as well as the contributors to their groundbreaking collection, provide a model for what it means not only to take propaganda seriously, but in particular to reconsider it outside of perceptions that hardened during and after World War II. “Propaganda is not intrinsically evil or immoral,” Auerbach and Castronovo explain (p. 5). It can in fact be positive, such as in the context of public health propaganda such as an antismoking or a seatbelt advocacy campaign. Propaganda is, moreover, always “fluid, varying according to context and function” (p. 5).⁴

Amid this framework of propaganda studies as concerned with a realm of public discourse of sophistication and utility, and a subfield of rhetorical and literary historical studies, one area where the sticker collections from the Basque Country may help focus our attention is the relationship between propaganda and art. Art’s potential as propaganda has long been assumed in gestures of counternarrative world-building for historically marginalized groups. As the American writer and intellectual W.E.B. DuBois famously put it in a 1926 speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (DuBois 1926),

all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (p. 296)

Although these remarks are historically and culturally situated in the context of propaganda's use in the struggle of Black Americans, what DuBois describes as the inherent "right of propaganda" is fundamental for oppressed peoples. The capacity of art to persuade and influence as propaganda, moreover, is essential to the domain of art. DuBois' perspective is quite like the view held by George Orwell, who wrote similarly, in his seminal essay on Charles Dickens, "All art is propaganda. Neither Dickens himself nor the majority of Victorian novelists would have thought of denying this. On the other hand, not all propaganda is art" (Orwell 1946, pp. 56–57). Wagering that "probably there are copies of one or two of [Dickens'] books lying about in an actual majority of English homes" (p. 57), Orwell provides an account of Dickens not only as an artist of language or craftsperson of plot and narrative, but as a wholesale cultural and political orientation: the model of the "*generously angry* . . . nineteenth-century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all the smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls" (emphasis original, p. 75). Not incidentally, Orwell wrote this characterization in 1939, shortly after his experience volunteering in the Spanish Civil War. There, he witnessed firsthand the threats of fascism and totalitarianism on the Iberian Peninsula, and became, like Picasso, a vocal critic who sought to use his own work to raise awareness of what was happening in the region as a warning against what could befall Europe and the world more broadly (in his retrospective, nonfictional account *Homage to Catalonia*, and especially later fictional works such as *1984* and *Animal Farm*). In our own time, the political rhetoric of art may seem to be easier to identify, where, for instance, works by artists such as Banksy transform reality only when the political (ideological superstructure) is identified. However, that is in part because figures such as Picasso and Orwell, not to mention theorists such as DuBois, helped to pave the way to this paradigm.⁵

DuBois and Orwell both sought to show how art considered to be, and deliberately deployed as, propaganda could offer a legitimate affront to hegemony. The two writers thus provide a helpful rubric for how we might frame the sticker materials from the Basque Country. Building upon DuBois's notion that art as propaganda is the "right" of those fighting hegemonies, as well as Orwell's idea that the ideologies underwriting art propagate inevitably, we approach the Basque materials—in particular, a series of stickers adapting and remixing Picasso's *Guernica*—as examples of the rhetorical function art can serve in daily life.

Before the age of digital memes and smartphones, the Basque stickers were fixtures in settings such as bars and cafes throughout the Basque Country. Before stickers adorned laptop and iPad covers, they were worn on clothing, and they marked backpacks and briefcases. Their circulation was of course limited by the physical constraints of printing, as well as the serendipity of encountering them in daily life. One would find a specific sticker by chance, rather than curated by a targeted algorithm developed by browsing habits or harvested data. Yet they exemplify a rich, discursive community complete with its own sharing practices and conventions, and their specific circulation pathways of pastiche, remix, and adaptation often depict the logic of what today we might call a "meme" in slow motion. These stickers started conversations, marked events, and responded to political questions and crises. In some cases, they even gave directives and orders:

Figure 1 (below), for instance, instructs not to buy or read "*La Voz de España*," a Franco-aligned newspaper edited in Donostia (San Sebastian) that operated from 1936 to 1980. It also includes the statement "*no publicidad/publizaitaterik ez*" [no publicity] in both Spanish and Basque. Figure 2 (below) operates in a similar vein.



Figure 1. Date Unknown. Retrieved from *Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa*. All photographs courtesy of Iker Arranz Otaegui.



Figure 2. Date unknown. Retrieved from *Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa*.

This sticker states not to buy or read the newspaper “Norte Expres,” a publication coming from the province of Araba (Álava) in the Basque Country. The selection of the colors resembles those of the Basque flag. The use of the second person singular in “compres” establishes a direct link with the agency of the motto as a call to individual action. These are not the only stickers we could identify among the thousands of the collections; there are many similar examples that attack, support, or directly engage with press and media.

Propaganda stickers with direct political messaging and slogans, such as those represented by Figures 1 and 2, are common in the collections. Other stickers are more playful, even while still addressing serious political themes. For instance, the sticker shown in Figure 3 (below) protests a law slowing the redistribution of centralized power in post-Franco in Spain, while incorporating a cartoonish mouth and extended tongue clearly riffing on the Rolling Stones “Hot Lips” logo:



Figure 3. Date unknown. Retrieved from *Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa*.

The sticker engages the conversation about the Spanish law LOAPA, or Ley Orgánica de Amortización del Proceso Autonómico (Organic Law of Amortization of the Autonomic Process), a 1982 law approved by the Spanish parliament that would sequence the different competencies of local, regional, and autonomous communities (such as the Basque Country government) toward some kind of synchronization process. This could slow down the transfer of power. There was a vocal opposition to this law coming from various nationalist parties. The sticker combines mockery, in the form of a phrase seemingly uttered by the iconic, pop-cultural Rolling Stones tongue, alongside the Basque interjection “ene ama!” (oh my!). In these examples, we can begin to see how observing the motifs of these stickers gives us access to very particular (micro)events and protests during tumultuous years of the transition into democracy in Spain, and, significantly, from a resistant, often subversive, Basque perspective.

Although, as Orwell would have it, “not all propaganda is art” in the Benedictine sticker collections, the archive also contains many sophisticated, truly artful stickers, which contain explicit allusions to high art as well as evocations of significant moments in Basque history. For instance, the example in Figure 4 (below) evokes both the defeat of Charlemagne’s army at Roncesvalles in 778, a symbolic event in Basque cultural memory on par with the Guernica bombing, as well as abstract tropes from modern Basque sculpture:

This sticker mentions an iconic location in the history of the Basque Country, which here has become the site of a celebration in 1978 marking the 1200 anniversary of Charlemagne’s defeat at Roncesvalles (Orreaga in Basque, Roncesvaous in French). The sticker combines the denominations of the site in all three regional languages. It implicitly evokes the 11th century epic poem *Le Chanson de Roland*, which recounts the episode. Its central image also appears to play on the abstract sculpture styles of Eduardo Chillida or Jorge Oteiza, both famous Basque sculptors whose work is displayed at prominent sites across the region. In this sticker, the commemoration of this epic episode is expressed through the aesthetics of Basque modern art (or the [Basque] *aesthetic subject* described by Oteiza in his works).



Figure 4. Date unknown. Retrieved from *Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa*.

The *Guernica* stickers stand out further in this rich media ecology for their complexity and for their cultural significance evoking and remixing one of the world's most important antiwar paintings. These items take one of the worst atrocities of the Spanish Civil War ([Gobierno de España 2013b](#)), the bombing of the Basque town and cultural center of Gernika by German and Italian airplanes at General Franco's request, and show through processes of what today we might call meming how Picasso's rendering of it plays out in Basque cultural memory in the years when Franco's regime was finally receding from power. At Gernika, Franco's fascist regime collaborated with German and Italian forces, whose bombers carried out a brutal attack on the civilian population of the town on 26 April 1937. It was not the first attack—some surrounding towns, such as Durango, were the targets of bombings during the preceding days—but it was the most symbolic one, and unprecedented in its scale as what Xabier Irujo calls a "war experiment whose objective was to develop a new system of terror bombing by destroying an *entire town*" (emphasis ours, [Irujo 2018](#), p. 75). The propaganda stickers bear the mark of this historical trauma, and, in a DuBoisian mode where propaganda is a "right" of the oppressed, also seek to change the conversation on behalf of Basque participants.

A final contextual note, before we address the *Guernica* stickers directly: it also bears acknowledging that, since World War II, art within the Basque region has played a unique role in both public debate and urban design, and sometimes a contentious one. The history of the city of Bilbao, as well as the bombing of Gernika, are particularly entangled ([Moore 2018](#)). Bilbao, an industrial port city and the second largest industrial center in Spain (after Catalonia), was the original target of the firebombing that would devastate Gernika. It was spared because the German and Italian military leaders who collaborated with Franco's forces convinced the Nationalists that Gernika, the Basque cultural capital, would be a more symbolic target. Bilbao's manufacturing capacities would be better off preserved, reasoned the generals, and utilized ([Kurlansky 1999](#), pp. 197–99). This transpired, but decades later, a new, postindustrial Bilbao was built around a branch of the Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Gehry, after which the city became a thriving tourist destination, a

phenomenon known globally as the “Bilbao effect” by municipalities seeking to replicate such a transformation ([Muschamp 1997](#)). Many Basques expected to see a long-held dream brought to fruition when the museum opened in 1997. Picasso’s *Guernica* had been exhibited in the US and Europe, but never in the Basque Country, and many Basques hoped that the Guggenheim’s opening would be the occasion to finally bring the painting to the region targeted by the violence the painting documents (Gernika is a mere thirty kilometers away from Bilbao). Yet despite Bilbao becoming a destination on the international art scene, and for that matter a node of the Guggenheim Foundation’s global influence, even the arrival of the prestigious museum was not warrant enough to bring Picasso’s famous painting to the Basque Country. It is a great historical irony that what may be the most famous antiwar painting of all time has never been displayed in the land whose victimization and trauma it protests, in particular, in a museum built in the city that had been an original target for the bombing. This irony is not lost on the Basque people. We will show that the *Guernica* stickers from the Benedictine collection, as gestures of remix and pastiche—and propaganda—nevertheless provide evidence that *Guernica* has been on display in the Basque Country despite this injustice, albeit on lower frequencies.

2. Remixing *Guernica*

A long history of adapting and readapting to the exigencies of specific historical moments defines the Basque people. For example, a proactive diplomatic sense with Romans, Muslims, or Catholic kingdoms put Basque societies in a privileged position historically. Toward the middle of the twentieth century, the confrontation of Basque society, not only divided but conflicted from within, might be better approached from a more precise angle when analyzing concrete episodes that lightly but constantly moved the needle. Sometimes it was a headlong rush into a tragedy, sometimes into a vanishing hope. Mass media, in particular, have recorded and registered almost all the tiny happenings of the toughest and hardest times during the late 1980s and 1990s in the Basque Country, which also have been recorded statistically ([Gobierno de España 2013a](#)). These times are popularly known as *los años de plomo* (literally, the times of lead). The stickers in the Benedictine collections can often serve as quick-access loci that make it possible to reflect upon issues pressing on Basque society.

An examination of these crafty stickers aims to establish some base narratives that addressed political and ideological views during the first years following the dictatorship, as Spain, and with it the Basque Country, entered into an adolescent democracy. Despite political and public life being persistently marked by multiple figures who remained from the fascist regime, Spain began a long process of restructuring not only the state, but also the social life and cultural borders from the living remains—and thus the persistent influence—of a crushing regime. Unlike police reports, court sentences, journalist accounts, and other utilitarian modes of public discourse often used to document the period, the visual rhetoric present in these stickers offered two unprecedented opportunities. First, it offered observers the ability to have access to microevents during highly conflicted times from an insider’s perspective; the rhetorical voice acquires a collective agency that manifests in the individuals who displayed these stickers publicly on their clothes. Second, the level of exposition and scale of production of this format of propaganda are remarkable both in the number of stickers available and their variety. While the present study accounts for only a small selection of stickers from the collections, we explored more than 20,000 stickers from Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa, as well as around 25,000 stickers from the private collector (Iñaki de Nikolas, see Note 2).⁶ The content of these collections are duplicated in some cases, but to date there has not been a cross-study or any research related to this material in order to classify it accordingly. While that classificatory work remains, there are several specific currents within the archive worth exploring, including labor rights, green discourses, and support for armed struggle (both from the extreme right and radical left). For the present study, we focus on examples that play on the tropes and significance of *Guernica*, given that painting’s centrality to the international understanding

of the historical trauma of the Basque people and the Basque conflict. The *Guernica*-related stickers in the collection provide one pathway through the Lazkao archives, and open a model for further exploration in these rich materials.⁷

The *Guernica* stickers stand out because they establish a clear bridge between aesthetics and rhetoric. It is important to keep in mind the special significance of the historical event memorialized in the painting for the Basque people—as a prototype of deliberately traumatic mass aerial bombardment of civilians—and as an especially horrifying moment in the history of the Spanish Civil War. As part of the collective imaginary (Castoriadis 1998) of the Basque “cause,” Gernika’s bombing remains a milestone for explaining the roots of the political conflict.

The first three examples belong to the Benedictines Foundation in Lazkao. The fourth example was retrieved from a private collector. These are not the only stickers that are informed by artistic currents: there are numerous stickers that show forms and styles related to influential regional artists (such as Jorge Oteiza or Eduardo Chillida), and some reproduce or are inspired by poems and writings by Basque intellectuals.

In this direction, the most noteworthy motif we have found so far involve the elements as well as the partial or complete reproduction of Picasso’s *Guernica*. The first sticker we examine here presents the bilingual slogan, “Euskal Kulturaren Patriomoniarengatik Gernika Euskadirentzat/Por un patrimonio cultural vasco. El Gernika para Euskadi” (Figure 5), or, roughly, “For one Basque cultural legacy. *Guernica* for (towards) the Basque Country,” reflecting the aforementioned conflict regarding the painting.



Figure 5. Date unknown. Retrieved from *Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa*.

It is significant that two languages are used in this sticker (and many others), usually in Basque and Spanish, sometimes in Basque and French. This demonstrates an understanding that the audience, in this case, proindependence and leftist, consists of Spanish, Basque, and French speakers. The language also reflects, through the use of articles and prepositions/suffixes, the understanding of a unitarian Basque cultural heritage (“un” in Spanish, “a” suffix in Basque). Furthermore, the claim is not linguistically framed in a territory, as one could expect (no location markers are present). Instead, the preposition *para* (finality, usefulness, or direction) in Spanish and the suffix *-rentzat* in Basque refer to

an action of recovery, a return in exchange, whilst the more natural way had been “a” in Spanish or the suffix “ra” in Basque to articulate the sense of location or direction. The painting, in this case, is inserted in between the slogans, pairing the partition of languages in Basque society. Picasso’s artwork thus quite literally becomes a visual motif for union and tragedy.

Three other stickers that accompany this first example walk different paths in the presentation of their structure and rhetoric, building upon and remixing *Guernica* via different formulations. The complexity of Picasso’s *Guernica* allows various interpretations, which transcend the original meaning of the painting and give new agency to the people creating and circulating the stickers. From the transfiguration of artistic conventions by switching light as a motive of virtue to evil, Picasso depicts a series of figures in various states of agony, mourning, and death, some of whom appear to be trying escape the painting as much as they are trying to escape the bombing. One of the most striking figures in the original painting is a figure in the darkest part of the painting (far right side), who finds him or herself cornered in front of a suffocating, small square window. This figure is replicated in a second sticker (Figure 6), along with the slogan “Amnistia Denontzat” (“Amnesty for All”), and the name of the Basque town of Erandio, Bizkaia.

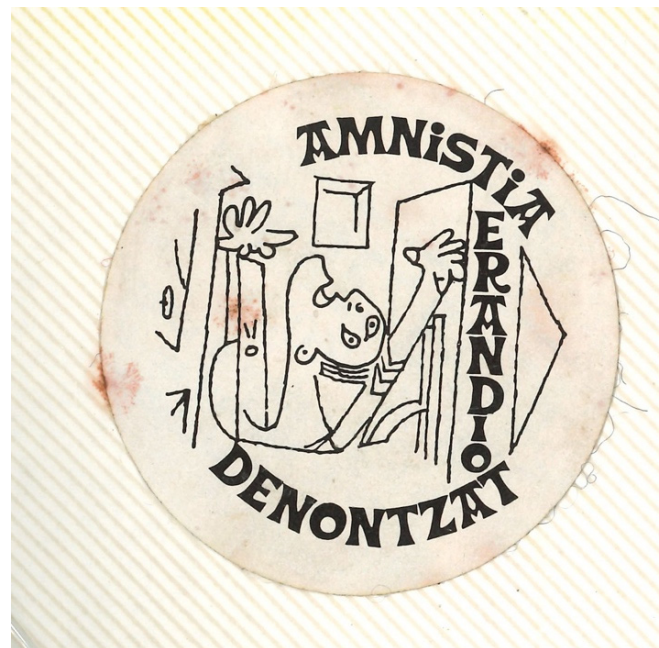


Figure 6. Date unknown. Retrieved from *Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa*.

This sticker was likely produced to be distributed during the local festivities in Erandio near Bilbao, as part of the general effort to spread the word in the 1980s among left-wing activists of those imprisoned or under persecution for resistance to the Spanish state. One can observe here how the agony of the figure, in their displacement from the painting, is assigned not to the agents of resistance who are present (the distributor/creator and holder of the sticker) but to those who are absent (the prisoners produced during the armed conflict), and indeed those other suffering figures from the original painting. It is of course impossible to know how widely this sticker would have been worn when circulated. We can nevertheless document its potential rhetorical impact regarding two key features of the public discourse of amnesty in the Basque Country: one is the momentum of a very localized collective imagination of a certain political tendency, and, second, how these stickers influenced manners in the context of public life, since they were produced *to wear* on one’s body. In the preinternet age, these complex, artful, allusive stickers become badges of politics or identity, where *use* quite literally means to wear them: over one’s clothes, on bar walls, school notebooks, and as bumper stickers on cars. One might compare the

gesture of donning a sticker as the preinternet equivalent of marking one's social media profile photograph with a framing political slogan or symbol.

A third sticker (Figure 7) in this series represents a human figure based on those in *Guernica*, although, though it is drawn in the sticker, it does not appear in the painting itself. This figure reproduces the agonistic expression of the human figures in the painting, upside-down in this case, and hopelessly trying to embrace the word “askatasuna” (freedom):

In this example, the rhetorical work of the sticker channels a similar semantic field as what we saw in Figure 6, since amnesty—mentioned above—resonates implicitly with this “freedom” slogan. Freedom, however, takes on a slightly different meaning during this time period insofar as it would have represented a bold reality during the blooming days of an incipient democracy, opening up all-too gradually with many active elements present from the previous fascist regime. In this sense, the stickers, as pictorial chronicles we can identify and name, register micromoments in the Basque conflict that are framed within, and indeed emerge from and remix very concrete aesthetics related to Picasso's *Guernica*. The process resembles what transpires on the internet in social media spaces in our own time, in practices of meming and remixing cultural tropes, only the differences here are the slower timescale dictated by a physical medium.



Figure 7. Date unknown. Retrieved from *Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa*.

This particular allusive move—to take a single figure from a complex painting containing many human figures, and then to recontextualize it—occurs elsewhere in the Benedictine collections. In Figure 8 (below), a similar gesture extracts the Infanta from *Las Meninas* by Diego Velazquez (1656), adds a mustache to her famous visage, and repurposes the likeness in the service of a modern political cause:



Figure 8. Date unknown. Retrieved from *Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa*.

This sticker apparently protests against an executive order limiting job access for students who choose to study Fine Arts in the university. The motif in this case is one of the figures of *Las Meninas*. The moustache—perhaps a nod to the surrealist irreverence of Salvador Dalí—has been added in a gesture of either mockery or disobedience to the canonical artistic reference. The motto is expressed both in Spanish and Basque: “jobless because of executive order.”

Our final example (Figure 9) is more complex, and represents a full-scale reimagining of *Guernica*:



Figure 9. Date unknown. Retrieved from private archives of Iñaki de Nicolas.

This sticker represents the intersection between two historical events in the Basque Country. One is the abovementioned symbolism of the bombing day, the other refers to the protests—and following riots—that took place in the final days of the Euskalduna shipyard in Bilbao. From 1984 to mid-1988, the shipyard began a negotiation process, both with the government and workers, to plan its closure. This was a very convoluted process, the details of which are beyond the scope of the present study, aside from noting the sacrificial implication of thousands of workers in protests that lasted for years as an enduring, polarizing political conflict in the Basque Country. In terms of duration, an instructive comparison might be the protest for the autonomous faculty of the university of the Basque Country from 1988 to 1999 (see *Historia de una Pancarta*, [Colectivo de Profesores](#)

1999). The Euskalduna shipyards are represented in the picture with a figure of a crane, most likely the “Carola” crane, which at that moment was the most powerful of its type in Spain. It is still standing today, even though it is no longer used, a little like the Titanic monuments in the Harland and Wolff shipyard in Belfast, which remain symbols of pride of the workers (and of similarly troubled days). The crane is perfectly integrated in Picasso’s painting, as another shadow that haunts the massive disaster happening in the foreground. Here, the painting—and indeed the historical trauma of the Guernika bombing itself—becomes most fully reclaimed as a Basque trope, amid the persistent failure to bring the actual painting to the region. At the front of the image, a banner seems to fall to the ground. The rectangles resemble the orange bricks, thermal orange bricks probably, which were also very characteristic of the industrial architecture of Bilbao, and the huge furnaces installed in different factories and shipyards to work the iron. This shipyard started its operations in the year 1900, becoming a center of industrialization in the Basque Country. This development inaugurated the golden years of Basque industrial activity, which provoked a series of major changes, including the transition from rural to urban spaces not only of the Basque population but of Basque culture itself. A new social class emerged in Bilbao as a result of industrialization, an elite class that owned and accumulated the wealth created in activities such as the shipyard’s production. The arrival of the docks was also the advent of the banking industry in Bilbao, and in Spain by extension. The complexity of the sticker’s critique extends precisely to the intersection between industrial activity and the capitalist model, since many of the riots and protests were a struggle to preserve the rights and dignity of thousands of workers. Amid the historical perspective of later episodes, specifically the Civil War and Franco’s regime, the closure of Euskalduna marked a traumatic passage in the Basque collective psyche into a newer economical model.

As noted above, there is an uncanny historical irony that the shipyard was spared destruction when Franco and his collaborators chose to firebomb Gernika instead of Bilbao, in part to preserve the shipyards for their own use, which later became precisely the site where the transformative Guggenheim Museum was constructed. This sticker perfectly captures the tragedy of the industrial decline of the Basque Country, superposed with the tragedy of the most destructive fascist event in Basque historical memory. The contraposition is not gratuitous, and significantly echoes previous agonistic and vindictive discourses, discussed in the other stickers, causing long-standing aftermath periods of controversy, and in some cases, outright conflict. It was the case of the bombing of Gernika, and it also was the case of the transformation of Bilbao, which significantly conditioned the discourse of aesthetics for Basque culture in the process (Arranz 2012).

3. Basque Visual Rhetoric: Some Conclusions

Since the 1990s, the street art of Banksy has captured the imagination of the world, and might present a final contemporary example of visual propaganda worth comparing to the Basque stickers: a series of street modeled paintings with a rhetorical dimension based in deep, sometimes brutal, criticism of political questions. The meme universe we have ready at hand via our many digital devices permit younger generations to articulate and participate in different, sometimes divergent, communicative registers of political discourse, and combine real scenarios with propagandistic reproductive models mainly to understand—literally, to make bearable—complex and contradictory questions. While the influence of the Basque stickers in shaping subsequent media forms would of course be limited to the region and would certainly be hard to measure (a quantitative let alone a genealogical analysis is probably impossible), the examples we document here represent important, but less known, example cases of the rising cultural zeitgeist of the visual meme as political discourse. The stickers depicted here also reflect and capture a truly troubled historical period in the Basque Country (or this would, at least, be the conventional manner of looking at them). Along with more conventional art forms, such as the painting by Picasso itself, and the utilization of rhetorical forms articulated within propaganda practices, the

stickers become a possible historical reference to understand current phenomena such as the meme universe as it plays out on popular platforms from Twitter to TikTok.

Yet, beyond situating specific moments of recent Basque history, these stickers may also create some kind of accountability for history. It is not that they are mere soundbites of information in the regular narrative of history, but they hold history accountable for what Badiou names *the political*. For Badiou, an event—the disruptive force in the linear account of history—is political, first if the subject is collective, which for Badiou means multiple (not numerable). The *appearance* of this subject in(to) the world represents a process of thought: a subject that is able to decode truth conditions. It is within this sphere that Badiou names the militant subject: a subject that is faithful to the event. He writes: “We call those who are constituted as subjects of a political stance the *militants* of the procedure” (Badiou 2005). Some of these *militants* are present in these stickers, subjects without boundaries, or to put it in a different way, uncompromised subjectivities, where difference, as well as the identity of determination, are useless notions (for instance, the shipyards protests were supported by workers that came from the entire peninsula and fought shoulder to shoulder with local workers). In this direction, these stickers provide this accountability by measuring the power of the State, or the state of the situation in Badiou’s words, to articulate a visual rhetoric that measures the State’s power:

Empirically, this means that when there is a truly political event, the State shows itself. It shows its excess of power, the repressive dimension. However, it also shows a measure of this excess which in ordinary times does not let itself be seen because it is essential to the normal functioning of the State that its power remain without measure, errant, unassignable. The political event puts an end to all that by assigning a visible measure to the excessive power of the State (Badiou 2005).

The Benedictine stickers show us glimpses of major political events in the Basque Country. The gaze, as it operates in cinema for instance, measures the power of the State in those days, as it asserts the magnitude of these powerful discursive moments as events, however writ small. If moments of disruption and exceptionality are also full of signals of change, grasping minimal soundbites of context and motives that belong to these moments might open the possibility to establish their rhetorical grounds. The stickers belong to the recent history of the Basque Country, yet—as Badiou points out—they also signal a rupture with history itself, and its accountability relies in their aesthetics.

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- ¹ Lazkaoko Beneditarren Fundazioa at Lazkao (Gipuzkoa, Spain): <http://www.lbf.eus/eu/> (accessed on 3 June 2022).
- ² The authors would like to thank collector and frequent collaborator with the Benedictines, Iñaki de Nicolas, who generously provided materials and guidance for this study.
- ³ See Arana Goiri, Sabino. 1980. *Obras completas*. (1980), as well as Antoine Thomson d’Abbadie & Augustine Chaho, *Études grammaticales sur la langue euskarienne* (1836) and Wilhelm Von Humboldt, *Researches into the Early Inhabitants of Spain with the help of the Basque language* (orig. *Prüfung der Untersuchungen über die Urbewohner Hispaniens vermittelt der vaskischen Sprache*) (1821).
- ⁴ It should be noted that the interdisciplinary field of propaganda studies, however cogently articulated in Auerbach and Castronovo’s (2013), expanded significantly following the 2016 US Presidential election, specifically in response to the arrival of “fake news” as a topic of massive public interest (“fake news” itself becoming a highly weaponized term). The COVID-19

pandemic has further provided a context in which the field has taken on a new urgency and political valence for many scholars. The scope and various agendas of this robust body of research, which has often transpired in fields such as communication, data science, and information science, lies beyond the domain of the present historical study. A representative glimpse may be found in recent publications such as the collection *Fake News: Understanding Media and Misinformation in the Digital Age* (Eds. Melissa Zimdars and Kembrew McLeod, MIT Press, 2020), and a special issue of the *Journal of Management Information Systems* titled “Fake News on the Internet” (Ed. Vladimir Zwass, vol. 38.4, Fall 2021).

- 5 Revisiting the relation between art and propaganda in his 2016 collection of essays *Art and Politics: Between Purity and Propaganda*, writer and curator Joes Segal (Wende Museum, Los Angeles) offers a reminder that the very idea of art as somehow “pure” can become a politicized myth: “the traditional distinction between artistic purity and propaganda is illusory to a large degree. What is more, the idea that there is a strict distinction between purity and propaganda is politically motivated, and this motivation still informs the way we tend to think about art and its history” (Segal 2016, p. 129).
- 6 See also Salgado-Mendez *Pegatas de Euskal Herria (1965–1979)* (Fundación Euskal Memoria, 2016), and *Pegatas de Euskal Herria (1980–1989)* (Fundación Euskal Memoria, 2018).
- 7 A further contextual note regarding these materials and archives, for future scholars: the Benedictine Foundation in Lazkao pivots on the figure of Juan Jose Agirre, a Benedictine monk who has been collecting materials of historical interest for more than forty years. In 2011, the group obtained the official support of the Diputación de Guipúzcoa and that of the local council of Lazkao. The Benedictine collections also reflect the holdings of a broader, more diffuse archive in the Basque Country and its diaspora: there is an established network of collectors both inside and outside of the Basque Country. These groups and individuals have their own meetings, markets, and online interactions to exchange, sell, and buy different stickers. Our main source, nevertheless, has one of the largest collections, which has been part of two previous publications in the Basque Country. Several methodological challenges are present when working with these materials. The first, as already discussed, is giving these stickers a date and year, which is very difficult because normally the design—which, as we shall see, often depended on an improvised, urgent response to an event—would be sent to local presses to set a relatively small print series. The groups or individuals that printed stickers in the past were not necessarily organized, nor did they have large budgets. A second difficulty is identifying authors. Neither the foundation nor the private collectors have been able to curate the collections with attendance to the complete provenance of these materials, especially given that some, if not many, of the artists would have sought to remain anonymous to avoid political exposure in the fraught Basque context. The total number of authors is likewise impossible to determine. While interested researchers might have more success in tracking down the presses, most are likely no longer in operation (especially with the rise of digital publication). Like many archives of propaganda materials, the work of curation regarding the Basque stickers will likely remain forever in progress and incomplete.

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