Feminist Re-appropriations of National and Religious Symbols in Poland's Strajk Kobiet Protests

Protest Banners as Sites of Meaning-Making

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Abstract

This thesis examines how participant-made banners from the Strajk Kobiet protests in Poland re-appropriated national and religious symbols to challenge cultural narratives and offer alternative visions of Polishness and womanhood. Set against democratic backsliding and a strong state–Church alliance, the study focuses on five photographs from the Archive of Public Protests, selected for their engagement with recognised national or nationalised religious symbols. Using a constructivist approach to representation, the analysis draws on Barthes's denotation, connotation, and myth, combined with Panofsky's iconology, to identify two modes of creative re-appropriation: layered, which retains the sign while adding new meaning, and transformative, which inverts or dismantles it. Defamiliarisation and symbolic tension were found to be central mechanisms. The findings show that these banners positioned Polish feminism both inside the national vocabulary, through reclamation of shared icons, and against its exclusionary uses, by dismantling nationalist codes. This dual strategy revealed how feminism can both contest and inhabit national identity, challenging the boundaries of Polishness while redefining its symbolic core.

Keywords: *Strajk Kobiet, Polish feminism, Polish Nationalism, Feminist Patriotism, Creative Re-Appropriation, Visuality of Social Movements, Protest Banners, Human Rights Archives, Protest Movements, Constructivism, Representation, Semiotics, Iconology, Visual Methodology*

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1. Introduction

In recent years, scholars[1] have increasingly identified gender as a central battleground in the global crisis of democratic backsliding, driven by the rise of right-wing populism. Across contexts, these movements reveal a fixation on gender and sexuality, policing female and queer bodies while linking them to national security, identity, and belonging.

Poland offers a striking example. Between 2015 and 2023, under two terms of the PiS-led government, conservative ideology was normalized and institutionalized through strong ties between the state and the Catholic Church. This reinforced a patriarchal vision of national identity with serious implications for women's rights. This thesis contributes to the growing body of scholarship examining the social movement that has emerged in Poland in response to this ultra-conservative and illiberal shift.

Two major protest waves, the 2016 Black Protest and the 2020 mass mobilizations, marked the rise of *Strajk Kobiet* (Women's Strike), a feminist movement that redefined resistance in Poland. The 2016 protests erupted in response to a proposed near-total abortion ban, sparking a nationwide strike that ultimately forced the government to retreat. However, the struggle for women's rights and feminist resistance intensified significantly in 2020. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic provided a strategic opportunity for the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party to push through restrictive legislation targeting reproductive rights in autumn 2020, when the Constitutional Tribunal, politically influenced by the PiS government, declared abortion in cases of fetal abnormality unconstitutional. This decision eliminated the most common legal ground for abortion in Poland[2], imposing a de facto abortion ban.

The attack on women's rights in both 2016 and 2020 triggered the resurgence of a feminist movement that had long existed at the margins of Polish public life. What followed was the largest protest wave seen in Poland since the historic year of 1989. These demonstrations were not only about reproductive rights; they symbolized a broader rejection of authoritarianism, state control over women's bodies, and the erosion of democratic norms.

[1]Scholars Dietze and Roth, in *A Preliminary Cartography of Right-Wing Populism and Gender as an Emergent Field of Study* (2020), identify key themes, questions, and gaps in knowledge for the study of gender and right-wing populism. They argue that a common feature of right-wing populism is its obsession with gender, and that the increase and persuasiveness of right-wing populist tendencies is not possible without a gender perspective. G. Dietze and J. Roth (eds), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2020, p.10.

[2] 98% of abortions prior to 2020 was conduced due to fetal abnormality. This decision effectively removed the second of the three legal grounds for abortion in Poland, leaving only the possibility of abortion in cases of crime or threats to the woman's life.

Strajk Kobiet quickly became the most sustained and visible force of resistance to the country's erosion of democracy, bringing feminist discourse into the mainstream and introducing a broader call for equality, justice, and democracy. Notably, at the heart of these protests lies a deeper conflict over Polish identity. As Agnieszka Graff observes, "women's rights (especially reproductive rights) and the rights of sexual minorities have, in recent years, found themselves at a critical flashpoint in the debate over Polish identity. It turns out that a queer person and a feminist embody values that the right wing, the Church, and a significant part of society consider foreign to Polish tradition."[3] Within this context, where Polishness is defined in terms of Catholicism, heteronormativity, and traditional gender roles, *Strajk Kobiet* protesters are not only defending bodily autonomy but also challenging the boundaries of national belonging and identity.

However, despite its successful mobilisation and visibility, *Strajk Kobiet* has failed to achieve its core political demands. Conservative, anti-abortion forces remain strong, and in light of the 2025 presidential election results, the political climate presents no hope for reversing the 2020 Constitutional Tribunal ruling.

Nonetheless, while *Strajk Kobiet* failed in institutionalizing its goals, scholars, like Graff[4] and Majewska,[5] point to the movement's cultural and societal impact as its most lasting legacy, claiming that the cultural and symbolic impact of the protests has been profound, shifting public discourse and reshaping collective imagination around feminism, womanhood, and national identity. Thus, while failing to produce political outcomes, *Strajk Kobiet's* legacy lies in the new narratives, images, and meanings it produced. Driven by this new wave of feminism in Poland, the movement helped reshape collective imagination around Polish feminism, womanhood, as well as Poland and Polishness. Though its political vision remains unrealized, *Strajk Kobiet's* legacy endures through culture, language, art, and public discourse, leaving an enduring mark on Polish society and signaling an irreversible shift in how feminism, womanhood, and national identity are imagined and expressed.

To trace this cultural shift, this thesis investigates the visuality of the movement, focusing specifically on protest banners featuring national symbols. It explores how demonstrators creatively reworked, subverted, or re-signified traditional iconography to express alternative visions of Polishness and womanhood. The selected banners are identified as instances of

[3] A.Graff, *Świat bez Kobiet: Płeć w Polskim Życiu Publicznym*, 2nd edn., Warszawa, Marginesy, 2021, p.284.
[4] A.Graff, *Świat bez Kobiet: Płeć w Polskim Życiu Publicznym*, 2nd edn., Warszawa, Marginesy, 2021.
[5] E. Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*, London, Verso, 2021.

creative re-appropriation, containing deliberate reworkings of familiar imagery that challenge dominant narratives, assert alternative meanings, and evoke a sense of defamiliarization, prompting viewers to see the familiar in new and often unexpected ways. Drawing on Barthes's semiotics and Panofsky's iconography, and using a constructivist approach to representation, this analysis views banners as forms of political language and sites of contestation, where meanings of nation and identity are actively negotiated. In doing so, it contributes to the growing field of research on Polish feminism and nationalism, specifically by shifting attention from how nationalism defines gender to how the feminist movement contests and redefines the nation itself.

1.1. Research question

Protesters, through their banners, a visual and inherently political medium, express their discontent and opposition. Additionally, by participating in a protest and preformatively exposing their banners, the participants do more than protest; they engage in practices that create new meanings and alternative points of reference. By analyzing banners as modes of visual and political expression, this thesis explores how they not only challenge dominant cultural and political narratives but also generate new ones. These acts of visual expression contribute to broader narratives that reshape public understandings of Polish identity and womanhood. The central aim of this study is to examine how these narratives are constructed and what they reveal about the cultural contestations taking place in contemporary Poland.

At the heart of this inquiry is the question of how protest banners function as tools for reimagining national identity and womanhood. The research explores how these banners subvert dominant narratives by creatively re-appropriating familiar national and cultural symbols, and how, in the process, they give rise to alternative representations. Central to this analysis is the symbolic content of the banners: which national symbols are used, what their conventional meanings are within Polish cultural and political discourse, and how those meanings are transformed or re-signified by protesters. Understanding the traditional significance of these symbols allows for a deeper exploration of how they are strategically reinterpreted to articulate resistance.

This act of symbolic re-appropriation also opens space for exploring how protest imagery challenges entrenched patriarchal and religious narratives that underpin dominant conceptions of Polishness. By creatively engaging with national symbolism, the participants

of the *Strajk Kobiet* protests not only contest state authority but also reclaim and redefine the visual and rhetorical language of the nation itself. Through this exploration, the thesis aims to uncover how protest banners serve as a site of feminist resistance, contributing to the ongoing redefinition of Polish national identity and positioning of Polish feminism vis-à-vis Polish nationalism. Accordingly, the analysis shows how creative reappropriation contests and re-signifies meanings and associations, thereby challenging dominant narratives and conceptual frameworks.

1.2. Material

The materials used for this thesis are photographs of protest banners from protests organised under the banner of *Strajk Kobiet*. The photographic materials are obtained from the Archive of Public Protests (A-P-P), a collective of photographers and publicists documenting public protests in Poland and beyond since 2019. During the selection process, five photographs of protest banners were chosen for their creative re-appropriation of national symbols, achieved through modifications that evoke a sense of defamiliarisation. The selected materials include five images from Warsaw, four taken between 25 Oct 2020–28 Jan 2021, and one from 7 Jan 2024. The photographs are analysed for their indexical qualities, thus for what they reveal as a direct visual trace of the protests. The photographs, as photographic works, are not the focus of the study; rather, what they depict and document within their frame is investigated.

1.3. Delimitation

Two important delimitations frame the scope of this thesis. Clarifying these boundaries is essential to defining what this research does not aim to do. These delimitations concern, first, the broader relationship between Polish feminism and nationalism, and second, the nature and scope of the chosen materials in investigating *Strajk Kobiet* as a social movement.

It is important to note that this research does not seek to offer a definitive analysis of the complex relationship between Polish feminism and nationalism. Feminist approaches to nationalism in Poland remain ambivalent and diverse; the relation between the two is very ambiguous, and different feminist thinkers have different ideas on how to address and 'deal' with nationalism. Thus, this relationship raises important questions about whether national symbols should be reclaimed or rejected, and how feminists can position themselves within national, or even patriotic, identity, given the inherently gendered nature of national

discourse. Therefore, this thesis does not aim (nor would it be possible given the limitations of the material) to reach definitive conclusions about the relationship between Polish feminism and nationalism. But rather, to shed light on this relationship and offer some insight into its complexities. Especially as the selected material presents only instances where protesters decided to engage with national symbols, a part of the protesters who rejected and possibly opposed the usage of national symbols in the women's rights struggle are not represented in the chosen material.

Secondly, this thesis investigates a social movement, but not by attempting to analyze it in its entirety or offering a comprehensive account. Instead, the focus is deliberately placed on small visual fragments, specifically, protest banners created and carried by individual protesters captured in photographs. These fragments are not representative of the whole movement, but offer a close-up view of how individuals visually expressed their ideas and emotions during the protests. In this sense, the research "zooms in" on the micro level of the movement.

By narrowing the lens in this way, the thesis explores a more personal, intimate dimension of protest, one that reveals raw, immediate expressions not mediated by official spokespeople or strategic messaging. These banners, often created in moments of urgency and emotion, carry spontaneous, powerful messages. While it is impossible to fully know the intentions behind each one, their public display transforms them into political statements with social resonance. No one controlled their production; they emerged organically, driven by personal conviction.

The choice to examine the movement through these visual fragments is intentional. It allows for an exploration of meanings, tensions, and affective expressions that may otherwise remain overlooked in broader analyses. By engaging with this micro level, the thesis aims to capture how protest becomes a site not just of political resistance, but of symbolic and emotional redefinition.

2. Background

This chapter situates the recent mass mobilisations and resurgence of feminist resistance in Poland within the broader socio-political and historical context of the country. It provides essential background for understanding how Poland's cultural narratives have shaped the conditions for the feminist movement and its positioning to Polish nationalism.

This contextual framework plays a critical role in the thesis, as it informs the interpretation of the visual content of the protest banners analysed in later chapters. The meanings embedded in these banners cannot be fully understood without considering the ideological forces that have shaped public discourse in Poland. Therefore, this background is a necessary step in ensuring clarity and depth in the analysis that follows.

2.1. Polish Nationalism

This sub-chapter examines the emergence, development, and function of Polish nationalism in the contemporary context, emphasizing its patriarchal and gendered dimensions. It is organized into three parts: first, the historical roots of Polish nationalism and its fusion with Catholicism; second, the central role of martyrology in shaping national identity; and third, the gendered dimension of Polish nationalism, focusing on womanhood and reproduction.

2.1.1. Historical Roots of Polish Nationalism and Its Fusion with Catholicism

The emergence of Polish national identity can be traced to the late 18th-century elites of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, who, facing the decline and impending collapse of the nobles' republic, began to reimagine it as a national community.[6] The fall of the Commonwealth coincided with the rise of Romanticism, which spread nationalist ideas across Europe. Additionally, resistance to russification and germanisation deepened patriotic sentiment and reinforced an idealised Polish national identity.[7] Under these circumstances, Polish national identity has emerged in a broader, socially inclusive sense in the 19th century.[8]

Contemporary Polish nationalism is a Christian ethno-nationalism, centered around the equation Pole=Catholic, offering an exclusivist vision of Polishness.[9] Although the link between Catholicism and Polishness has varied over time, it gradually grew stronger. By the 20th century, they were so closely intertwined that a distinct theology emerged, casting the nation as central to salvation and equating Polish identity with Catholicism.[10] Consequently,

[6]B. Porter-Szűcs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*, 1st edn., Warsaw, Filary, 2021, p.28.
[7]D. Norman, *Heart of Europe: the past in Poland's present*, new edn., New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 236-237.
[8]B. Porter-Szűcs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*, 1st edn., Warsaw, Filary, 2021, p.28.
[9] J. Michlic, 'The Impact of Ethno-nationalism on the Identities of Jews and People of Jewish Origins in Modern Poland', *Insiders and Outsiders: Dilemmas of Est Europen Jewry*, 2010, p.131.
[10]B. Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*, 1st edn., Warsaw, Filary, 2022, pp. 450-451.

Catholic moral teachings shifted from the private, spiritual realm into public life, becoming civic duties and acts of patriotism. In this view, abortion is not merely a sin against God's creation, as the Vatican frames it, but a betrayal of the nation and a neglect of one's national duty. Reproductive choices are seen as directly shaping the nation's claim to its land, the state's strength, and the Church's future.[11]

In contemporary Poland, faith and patriotism remain closely intertwined. Patriotic symbols in churches and masses for the nation are common, and sins are often condemned not for harming the soul but for threatening the nation.[12] This fusion of religion and nationalism blurs civic and religious duties, symbolically subordinating the entire nation, regardless of belief, to Christianity. Issues such as abortion, contraception, divorce, and sexuality thus acquire a distinctly national character, while Polish identity is cast as sacred, fixed, and beyond reinterpretation.[13]

2.1.2. Martyrology and the Siege Mentality

Polish nationalism grew from the struggle for independence during the 1772–1918 partitions, shaped by memories of loss, uprisings, wars, and occupations. This legacy fostered a narrative of suffering and heroic victimhood: martyrology, which fuels a defensive nationalism reliant on identifying constant threats, real or imagined.[14] Paradoxically, in a peaceful and democratic Poland, nationalism often invents new enemies to maintain urgency. In recent years, "gender ideology" has been framed by conservative and nationalist forces as a foreign assault on traditional values, family, and moral order, promoting homosexuality, abortion, and the rejection of "natural" sexual differences.[15] These "abnormalities" are depicted as alien to Polishness, blamed on Western influence and institutions like the EU. Feminists and LGBTQ+ people are cast as agents of Western imperialism imposing alien values under the guise of equality, echoing 20th-century antisemitic narratives about hidden lobbies threatening civilization.[16]

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[11] B. Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*, 1st edn., Warsaw, Filary, 2022, pp. 481-483.
[12] B. Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*, 1st edn., Warsaw, Filary, 2022, p. 485.
[13] B. Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*, 1st edn., Warsaw, Filary, 2022, p. 481.
[14] B. Porter-Szűcs, *Poland in the Modern World: Beyond Martyrdom*, 1st edn., Warsaw, Filary, 2021, p.18.
[15] I. Czyż, *PiS-led Government's Opposition to the Istanbul Convention in Poland: An Analysis of the Rhetoric and Tactics used by the Law and Justice Party's led Government in their Opposition to the Istanbul Convention,* BA diss., Malmö, Malmö University, 2023, p.10.
[16] B. Umińska-Keff, *Barykady: kroniki obsesyjne*, 1st edn., Kraków, eFKa, 2006, p.3.

Consequently, ‘Polishness’ is imagined as perpetually under siege, refusing peace or pluralism, and sustaining itself through historical trauma and the invention of new threats and scapegoats.

2.1.3. Gendered Nationalism

Thirdly, Polish nationalism is deeply gendered, constructing national identity through a symbolic vision of womanhood centered on motherhood, sacrifice, and patriotic duty.[17] Within this framework, women are primarily seen as reproducers of the nation, biologically, through childbirth, and culturally, through the transmission of language, values, and devotion to the homeland.

Central to this vision is the myth of the Polish Mother (Matka Polka), a figure shaped by the veneration of the Virgin Mary and the feminization of the ‘fatherland’. She embodies the ideal woman: saintly, self-sacrificing, and morally pure, a phantasm that merges myth and stereotype. Alongside figures like the Virgin Mary and the allegorical Polonia, the Polish Mother dominates the national imagination, symbolizing both spiritual strength and patriotic obligation.[18]

This vision of womanhood has its historical roots in the symbolic inclusion of Polish women in the imagined national community. This inclusion stemmed from the growing need to preserve and cultivate national identity during the partitions (1772-1918).[19] After a series of failed 19th-century uprisings and amid intensifying germanisation and russification, women came to be seen as guardians of a ‘patriotic mission’, preserving Polish language, culture, and values. In this context, the figure of the Polish Mother-Patriot emerged, rooted in the cult of the Virgin Mary and Catholic tradition. Women were expected to sacrifice personal autonomy, raise patriotic and religious children, endure hardship, and embody quiet heroism. This ideal turned female suffering into a sacred duty and moral strength. By the late 19th century, it became the dominant model of womanhood, laying the groundwork for women’s

[17]A. Graff, 'Claiming the Shipyard, the Cowboy Hat, and the Anchor for Women: Polish Feminism’s Dialogue and Struggle with National Symbolism', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019, p. 472.
[18]M. Grzyb, 'The Polish Variant of Patriarchy? Explaining the Relationship Between Gender Inequality and Violence Against Women in Poland', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 30, nos. 6–7, 2024, p.1394.
[19]J. Morawska-Tołek, 'Between Sacrifice and Duty. The Changing Image of the Polish Mother-Patriot and Evolution of Women’s National Agenda in the Province of Posen at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *Women’s History Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2024, p. 575.

recognition as citizens in 1918. However, this citizenship was rooted in reproduction and sacrifice, with women's suffering glorified as a path to national recognition.

Therefore, the idealized tropes marginalize real women as political subjects, reducing their societal role to national service rather than full citizenship. Women's rights and autonomy are consistently subordinated to the perceived needs of the nation, and the urgency of the national cause is used to override social and political demands. In this nationalist discourse, the boundaries between sacred and secular, private and public, spiritual and political blur, so much so that, as Graff notes, "the image of the Virgin Mary, the Polish Mother, and Poland as mother merge into one. Meanwhile, real women disappear from view."[20]

Feminism's positioning within this framework is inherently oppositional, contesting deeply embedded patriarchal structures and demanding the redefinition of national identity to include gender equality, bodily autonomy, and pluralism. Understanding this positioning is essential to interpreting the symbolic and political significance of feminist protest, including the visual language of resistance that will be analyzed in later chapters.

3. Literature Review

This literature review situates the thesis within existing interdisciplinary scholarship spanning political, gender, cultural, and visual studies. The goal is to identify the scholarly conversation this project contributes to and to highlight the gaps it addresses. The literature discussed here focuses on four major areas: (1) visual methodology in protest research, (2) visual research on *Strajk Kobiet*, (3) the significance of Strajk Kobiet as a political and cultural rupture, and (4) the intersection of Polish feminism and nationalism.

3.1. Investigating the Visuality of Social Movements

This thesis adopts a visual methodology to analyze the symbolic and aesthetic strategies deployed during protests. Protest research has long privileged textual and discursive methods, with visual methods remaining underutilized.[21] As scholars Drozdowski[22] and Axel[23] have noted, visual analysis has yet to gain consistent traction in social movement studies, despite the increasing centrality of images in contemporary political life. This thesis takes a novel

[20] A.Graff, *Świat bez Kobiet: Płeć w Polskim Życiu Publicznym*, 2nd edn., Warszawa, Marginesy, 2021, p.262.
[21] A. Philipps, 'Visual protest material as empirical data', *Visual Communication*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2012, p.1,
[22] R. Drozdowski, 'Jak i po co badać wizualność protestów społecznych?', *Czas Kultury*, no. 4 (195), October 2017, pp. 21–26.
[23] A. Philipps, 'Visual protest material as empirical data', *Visual Communication*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2012.

visual approach to studying a social movement, contributing to emerging research that highlights the role of images in resistance, identity, and collective action.

The choice to focus on visuality is grounded in the broader "visual turn" within sociology and related disciplines, which emphasizes the increasing dominance of images in shaping political and cultural life. Roland Bleiker observes that "we live in a visual age," yet "still know far too little about the precise role visuality plays in the realm of politics."[24] Drozdowski similarly points out that the turn toward the visuality of social protests is both timely and relevant: "In an increasingly iconized culture, where images take precedence and become more important than words, the interest in all forms of visuality (including the visuality of protests) appears to be an obvious choice."[25] This observation is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary protests, as the ease of taking, producing, reproducing, and sharing images has amplified the visual character and dimension of protest movements.

3.2. Visual research on Strajk Kobiet

A growing body of research has examined the visual dimensions of Strajk Kobiet, particularly about performance, symbolism, and protest aesthetics. Scholars such as Sosnowska, Graff, Kamka, Kitliński, and Leszkowicz have explored visuals, ranging from banners and performances to memes and contemporary art, in the context of resistance and political expression.

Sosnowska,[26] in a performance-focused research, analyzes the visual trope of women's blood in the 2020 protests' banners and performances, arguing that it emerged as a powerful symbol of bodily autonomy and resistance. Graff,[27] investigates how Polish feminism has appropriated and contested national symbols. Using cultural studies methods, she traces the evolving meanings and cultural impact of these symbolic interventions, highlighting their role in shaping feminist discourse. In another article,[28] she examines feminist contemporary art in Poland, focusing on the emergence of 'angry women' as a new collective presence in the

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[24]R. Bleiker (ed.), *Mapping Visual Global Politics*, London, Routledge, 2018,
[25] R. Drozdowski, 'Jak i po co badać wizualność protestów społecznych?', *Czas Kultury*, no. 4 (195), October 2017, pp.22
[26]A. Sosnowska, 'Don't Ask for my Blood, Poland! Pro-choice protests and the visuality of women's blood', *Performance Research*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2023, pp. 88–95.
[27]A. Graff, 'Claiming the Shipyard, the Cowboy Hat, and the Anchor for Women: Polish Feminism's Dialogue and Struggle with National Symbolism', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019, pp. 472–496.
[28]A. Graff, "'You are not alone!' Poland's New Feminism and New Feminist Art", in *Freedom Taking Place: War, Women and Culture*, ed. Jessica Zychowicz, 2023.

public sphere, imagination, and arts. This aesthetic is interpreted as both a reflection of and a reaction to growing social unrest, catalyzing cultural change, and a marker of evolving feminist awareness and expression in Poland. Kamka[29] investigates the rhetoric of two protest waves: related to judicial reforms (2015) and abortion restrictions (2020) in a comparative analysis. She analyzes banners, memes, and photographs to trace new forms of expression of civic dissent and a generational shift in the visual rhetoric of citizenship. Meanwhile, Kitliński and Leszkowicz[30] explore the visual culture of *Strajk Kobiet*, framing protest materials: banners, posters, and slogans, as "cardboard art," a raw, personal, and politically charged form of folk art, that sustains a participatory and performative form of democracy in an illiberal setting.

Therefore, it is evident that existing research on the visuality of *Strajk Kobiet* spans visual arts, cultural studies, and political science. These works are distinctly interdisciplinary, highlighting how protest materials operate across multiple dimensions: symbolic, aesthetic, emotional, and political. They also often combine visual methods with textual or discursive analysis.

While existing scholarship captures the aesthetic, symbolic, and political power of protest visuals, much of it centers on curated artworks, prominent visual elements shaped by organizers, or broader symbolic shifts within feminist discourse. Although some studies address grassroots visuals such as protest banners, they often do so in broad or thematic terms. This thesis, by contrast, offers an in-depth, micro-level analysis of these grassroots materials, not merely to identify general trends or rhetorical strategies, but to examine how protest visuals generate meaning in the immediate context of mobilization. The most closely aligned work is that of Agnieszka Graff, who similarly investigates the interplay between feminism and nationalism. However, this thesis extends that focus by analyzing how these dynamics are expressed through the creative practices of ordinary protesters. In doing so, it contributes a focused and original perspective to the emerging field of visual protest studies in Poland.

[29] A. Kampka, 'Banners and Memes: The Rhetoric of Protests in Defence of Democracy and Women's Rights in Poland in 2015 and 2020', *Performance Research*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2022, pp. 125–135.
[30] T. Kitliński & P. Leszkowicz, "Feminist and Queer Action and Art in Poland's Illiberal Democracy", in *Resisting Far-Right Politics in the Middle East and Europe: Queer Feminist Critiques*, ed. Tunay Altay, Nadje Al-Ali & Katharina Galor, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2025, pp. 211–239.

3.3. Significance of *Strajk Kobiet*

This thesis is grounded in the existing literature that evaluates *Strajk Kobiet* as a social movement, analyzing its implications, significance, and impact on Poland's political, cultural, and social landscape. Engaging with this body of work is crucial, as it reveals how scholars have conceptualized *Strajk Kobiet* and its broader meaning. It also provides the foundation for how the movement is approached in this study, situating the thesis within ongoing academic discussions on *Strajk Kobiet*.

There is a vast body of literature encompassing this scholarly debate. Scholars such as Graff, Ślendzińska-Simon & Wójcik, Majewska, and Muszel & Piotrowski have examined its scale, significance, consequences, and impact. These studies span political, cultural, and societal effects, with varying analytical and theoretical approaches. Some see the movement as transformative, while others view its impact more critically. This diversity of perspectives is a key strength of the literature, offering a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of the movement.

Graff and Ślendzińska-Simon & Wójcik both use the concept of the social contract to evaluate the movement's significance. For Ślendzińska-Simon & Wójcik,[31] the 2020 protests contributed to voter mobilization that shifted Poland's political landscape, resulting in the 2023 electoral defeat of the PiS party and the beginning of a new social contract in which women's rights are to be taken seriously. Yet, authors note that Poland lacks true commitment to this new social contract, and legal reform remains elusive.[32] Similarly, Graff[33] sees the new wave of feminist resistance as a definitive end to the social contract between the state, the Church, and Polish society, which was in place since 1989, shaping the post-transformation power dynamic. Unlike Ślendzińska-Simon and Wójcik, Graff emphasizes the protests' cultural significance and impact. She distinguishes between political and cultural outcomes, arguing that, regardless of legislative change, the protests have triggered an irreversible cultural shift.[34] This builds on Graff's earlier article[35], where she frames the 2016 protests as a

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[31]A. Sledzinska-Simon & A. Wojcik, 'Taking Women's Rights Seriously: Women's Struggle for a New "Social Contract" in Poland', *Union University Law School Review (Pravni Zapisi)*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2024, pp. 20–56.
[32] A. Sledzinska-Simon & A. Wojcik, 'Taking Women's Rights Seriously: Women's Struggle for a New "Social Contract" in Poland', *Union University Law School Review (Pravni Zapisi)*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2024, pp. 50.
[33] in in *Something Has Broken, Something Has Spilled*
[34]Graff, A., 'Coś pękło, coś się wylało', in *Świat bez Kobiet: Płeć w Polskim Życiu Publicznym*, 2nd edn., Warsaw, Marginesy, 2021, pp. 326-337.
[35] A. Graff, "'You Are Not Alone!' Poland's New Feminism and New Feminist Art", in *Freedom Taking Place: War, Women and Culture at the Intersection of Ukraine, Poland, and Belarus*, ed. J. Zychowicz, Malaga, Vernon Press, 2023, p. 283.

cultural rupture marked by the rise of 'angry women', who broke taboos, challenged the sanctity of the Church, and created a rupture "at the very heart of Polish culture in the place where religion, national identity, and corporeality meet"[36].

Understanding the movement as a rupture in the social contract and cultural change underscores its role as a transformative social force. For this thesis, which is focused on the protest moment, scholars who identify it as a turning point provide especially valuable framing of the protests. The protests marked a collective break with both the state and the Church, while introducing new forms of expression and emotional intensity into public discourse. In this thesis, the *Strajk Kobiet* protests are understood as a charged cultural moments, ones that expose deep social contestation and generates new meanings, echoing the approaches and findings of Graff and Ślendzińska-Simon & Wójcik.

A markedly different perspective on the political significance of Strajk Kobiet is articulated by Majewska[37], who presents *Strajk Kobiet* as part of a broader global feminist movement encompassing International Women's Strike and campaigns such as #MeToo. She presents this feminist front as "the most important antifascist struggle today"[38]. She illustrates this mobilizing power through the Polish example, where *Strajk Kobiet* has represented "the most successful political resistance against the PiS government", as the only force that effectively challenged and halted Kaczyński's party, but also one that changed the public discourse in Poland by changing the societal position of women.[39] Majewska's book helps frame the banners analyzed in this study as part of a broader cultural revolution, placing Poland not in isolation from democratic currents, but as a vital front in the fight against contemporary fascism. Thus, even though this research concentrates on the local micro-scale, this struggle and opposition to the spoiling of women's rights and democracy is an internationalised struggle with global relevance.

Moreover, scholars analyzing the success of Strajk Kobiet emphasize its capacity to mobilize across class lines and the urban–rural divide. Muszel & Piotrowski[40] highlight how the 2016 protests were surprising in their wide geographic reach, occurring not only in major cities but

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[36] A. Graff, "'You Are Not Alone!' Poland's New Feminism and New Feminist Art", in *Freedom Taking Place: War, Women and Culture at the Intersection of Ukraine, Poland, and Belarus*, ed. J. Zychowicz, Malaga, Vernon Press, 2023, p. 283.
[37]E. Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*, London, Verso, 2021.
[38] E. Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*, London, Verso, 2021,p.6.
[39] E. Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*, London, Verso, 2021,p.78.
[40]M. Muszel & G. Piotrowski, 'Women's Protests in Small Polish Towns', *Ethnologia Polona*, vol. 43 (2022), pp. 81–98.

also in small towns. This trend grew stronger in 2020, challenging the idea of deep conservatism in rural Poland. Majewska also notes *Strajk Kobiet*'s success in uniting women across classes, highlighting its shift from liberal ideas of choice to a socialist focus on women's economic conditions, especially abortion access, which broadened its appeal.[41]

This ideological shift helped broaden participation by connecting feminism to everyday struggles and building solidarity beyond abstract ideals, creating a more inclusive movement. The protest banners reflect this wider grassroots challenge to clerical authority, conservatism, and state control, resonating across Polish society.

Scholars like Graff and Majewska see *Strajk Kobiet* as more than political protest, as a cultural rupture introducing new feminist identities, expressions, and forms of resistance. While its full political impact may develop over time, its cultural influence is already evident in inspiring a new feminist generation, reshaping public discourse, and questioning Church and state power. This thesis highlights protest banners as a site where Polishness and belonging are publicly reimagined.

3.4. Intersection of Polish Feminism and Nationalism

This thesis adds to debates on Polish feminism's engagement with nationalism. This section reviews how past literature describes their interplay and how feminist movements navigate national narratives. As pointed out by Graff, "while much scholarship exists on the place of gender in Polish nationalist discourse, the other side of the equation has not been the object of much research."[42] This observation highlights a gap in the literature: the limited scholarly attention to how Polish feminism responds to and contests nationalist narratives. Notably, as observed in the research process, the existing literature that engages with this relationship frequently centers Strajk Kobiet as a case study, reflecting not only growing scholarly interest in the intersection of feminism and nationalism but also the central role of Strajk Kobiet within this area of study.

Two scholars, Graff and Ramme, note that the 2016 protests marked a turning point in how national symbols, patriotic rhetoric, and national belonging were taken up by feminist activists.

[41] E. Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*, London, Verso, 2021,p.70.
[42] A. Graff, 'Claiming the Shipyard, Representations of Women's Activism in the Polish Public Sphere', *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2004, p.473.

Graff[43] examines how Polish feminists have engaged with nationalism since 1989. Through visual analysis, she explores acts of symbolic appropriation, where national imagery is repurposed to resist patriarchal and nationalist rhetoric. She notes that national symbolism has become both a powerful and contested tool within the movement, arguing that Polish feminism has long balanced between reclaiming national identity and rejecting it as exclusionary. Before 2016, feminist responses to nationalism tended to follow either ironic critique or affirmative appropriation. However, the 2016 Black Protest blurred this divide, as patriotic imagery was widely used but carried ambiguous and shifting meanings. Symbols once clearly read as either feminist patriotism or anti-nationalist critique became open to multiple interpretations. Additionally, the original intentions and meaning were often inaccessible and largely detached from their evolving cultural significance.

Graff's work offers crucial insight for this thesis: national symbols, once tied to clear intentions, have become fluid and culturally dynamic. This transformation adds a new layer to the protests, where not only new meanings emerged, but former divisions within feminist thought gave way to a more unified, though complex, cultural moment. It underscores the protests' significance as a turning point in the evolution of Polish feminist discourse.

Ramme[44] analyzes how the 2016 protests reframed national belonging. She introduces the idea of a "feminist patriotic uprising" to describe the strategic use of symbols like the Polish flag and references to Solidarity to challenge dominant ideas of national identity. Rather than rejecting nationalism, protesters appropriated its imagery, both sincerely and satirically, to assert feminist legitimacy within the national framework. Ramme argues that the protests' power lay not just in their scale, but in their framing of participants as Polish women, securing feminist visibility in national discourse. This moment, she contends, marked a shift toward a nationally grounded feminist movement that reclaimed cultural space from the right and redefined political participation.

Ramme's analysis is important for this thesis as it situates Polish feminism in direct relation to Polish nationalism. She argues that the wave of feminism that emerged in 2016 reclaims

[43]A. Graff, 'Claiming the Shipyard, the Cowboy Hat, and the Anchor for Women: Polish Feminism's Dialogue and Struggle with National Symbolism', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019.
[44]J. Ramme, 'Framing Solidarity: Feminist Patriots Opposing the Far Right in Contemporary Poland', *Open Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, 2019.

patriotism and national identity, constructing a common, popular, and national feminism that is framed as both patriotic and essential to the nation's democratic future.

This way of thought is also reflected in Majewska's book, where she offers a theoretical lens that situates Strajk Kobiet at the forefront of the anti-fascist contemporary struggle by conceptualising it as an inclusive, grassroots movement that embodies solidarity, bridges social divisions, and addresses a plurality of demands through collective, popular resistance. Drawing on Fraser, Hardt, and Negri, she conceptualizes it as a "counterpublic of the common", a space where marginalized groups resist cultural and state power through shared, everyday experiences. Rather than rejecting left-wing populism, Majewska reclaims it, emphasizing heterogeneity and the political agency found in ordinary life. She redefines the "common" to include not just what is shared, but also the mundane and lived, positioning the everyday as a site of resistance and feminist solidarity.

For this thesis, Majewska's perspective offers a counter-narrative to nationalist ideals that idealize women while erasing their realities. *Strajk Kobiet* emerges as a cultural force that challenges these myths by centering real, diverse experiences. As a Polish expression of fifth-wave feminism, it stands in direct opposition to right-wing populism, rejecting patriarchal and homogenous values in favor of intersectionality and inclusivity. Thus, the movement becomes both a political and symbolic counterforce to Polish nationalism, redefining Polishness through lived resistance.

Acknowledging the ambiguity of the relation between feminism and nationalism this thesis does not seek to map the full spectrum of feminism's engagement with nationalism, but rather contributes to this scholarly debate by examining how national symbols are strategically repurposed during the Strajk Kobiet protests to contest dominant narratives of Polishness and womanhood, highlighting the evolving, dynamic role of symbolic appropriation in Polish feminist movemnt and expression.

4. Theory and Methodology

This chapter presents the theoretical and methodological framework guiding the analysis. The chapter introduces: (1) the theoretical grounding of viewing Strajk Kobiet as a cultural rupture, (2) constructivist approach to representation, that dictades the approach of this thesis to meaning and its interpretation, (3) the two methods guiding the analysis and how they are

combined in a mixed methods approach, (4) the chapter describing material, its character, its origin and how it was selected, (5) its ethical considerations.

4.1. Strajk Kobiet as a moment of cultural rupture

This thesis situates Strajk Kobiet within the broader history of ideas, treating the movement not only as a political phenomenon but as a cultural rupture that contributed to the reshaping of cultural meanings and collective imaginations in Poland. While human rights studies often focus on political realities, this thesis shifts the analytical lens toward the visual, symbolic, and imaginative dimensions of protest, where deeper transformations of subjectivity, identity, and narratives unfold.

The choice to foreground the cultural and symbolic realm is motivated by two interrelated observations. First, despite its unprecedented scale and visibility, Strajk Kobiet has yet to achieve its political goals, such as liberalizing abortion laws. Yet, as claimed in the past literature, its cultural impact has been profound. Thus, this thesis approaches Strajk Kobiet as a culturally influential social movement, with impacts visible in evolving discourses on feminism, gender, and Polishness. The protests generated new symbols, slogans, and figures that entered public circulation and, in doing so, broadened the repertoire of political expression in Poland.

Second, the political sphere and the realm of language and imagination are both integral dimensions of lived reality, continuously shaping and informing one another. Accordingly, human rights research must take these interwoven cultural and symbolic realms seriously, recognizing them as essential to understanding social change and social movements. As historian Michelle Perrot insightfully observes, every revolution is first symbolic before it becomes structural. Not only because it is easier to change words than things, but because language and imagination are themselves dimensions of reality.

By acknowledging this, the thesis emphasizes that cultural shifts are not merely byproducts of political activism but foundational to long-term social and political transformation, especially when immediate legislative outcomes remain out of reach. The cultural impact of Strajk Kobiet, therefore, should be considered alongside its political demands as a significant arena of resistance, one in which dominant narratives are contested and new social imaginaries are

articulated. In this light, *Strajk Kobiet* can be considered not only a social movement but also a collective project of reimagining identity, belonging, and the nation itself.

In the selected materials, I treat Strajk Kobiet as marking a moment of cultural rupture, visible in the symbolic contestation of national symbols on protest banners, where Polishness and womanhood are collectively reimagined and re-signified. Because the analysis is confined to the protest moment rather than its afterlives, I do not claim durability; rather, I show that these meanings entered public space and discourse at that time, expanding the repertoire of political expression.

4.2. Constructivist approach to meaning

This thesis explores protest banners as signifying sites that participate in the construction and contestation of meaning. Drawing on Stuart Hall's model of representation, meaning is understood not as inherent to objects, symbols, or events, but as something constructed through representational systems. As Hall asserts, "it is participants in the culture who give meaning to people, objects, and events".[45] Representation, therefore, is not a neutral reflection of the world but a symbolic practice through which meaning is actively produced and negotiated.

Hall identifies two systems of representation. The first is the conceptual system, through which 'objects', whether concrete or abstract, are correlated with mental representations. Meaning emerges from the way we organize, classify, and relate these concepts within our minds. Although individuals possess unique conceptual maps, we share broadly similar systems within a culture, which allows for communication and collective meaning-making. Culture, in this sense, is defined by shared meanings or "shared conceptual maps"[46]. However, conceptual systems alone are not enough. To exchange meanings, we also need a shared language. Language is the second system of representation: a system of signs, words, sounds, images, that stand in for concepts and enable us to communicate. These signs form the meaning systems of culture.

This thesis approaches protest banners as a form of visual political language. Banners function not merely as decorative or supplementary materials but as meaning-producing

[45] S. Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in S. Hall, J. Evans, S. Nixon (eds.), *Representation*, 2nd edn., London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013, p.3.
[46] S. Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in S. Hall, J. Evans, S. Nixon (eds.), *Representation*, 2nd edn., London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013, p.18.

tools. As Hall notes, "any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign, and is organized with other signs into a system capable of carrying and expressing meaning"[47] can be considered a language. Banners, then, are not just passive objects; they are performative expressions of political and cultural narratives.

Banners are designed to be easily interpreted in the context of protest. Their meanings are often assumed to be self-evident because they use visual and textual cues that are culturally familiar. We instinctively identify which movement a banner belongs to, what issue it addresses, and what position it takes. However, this intuitive understanding relies on access to shared conceptual maps and cultural codes. If a banner appears difficult to interpret, it may reflect a disconnect between the creator's intent and the audience's familiarity with the cultural language being used.

In the analysis that follows, I interpret the meanings of protest banners through a constructivist approach. My interpretive method is shaped by this framework, guiding how I approach the material and my interpretations of it.

The meanings I derive at are not definitive or universal; they remain open to reinterpretation. By adopting a constructivist lens, I position meaning as something co-produced: not only through the internal logic of the signs themselves but also through the viewer's situated, cultural, and subjective interpretation.

Thus, the outcome of this analysis is not a singular or authoritative truth, but rather an elaboration of meaning, emerging through contextual background, the identification of semiotic elements, their interrelations, and creative acts of re-appropriation. These meaning-making practices are embedded within a specific theoretical and methodological framework, which both enables and constrains interpretation.

In this sense, theory and context function as counterweights to my inherently subjective readings. Although the interpretations I present are shaped by my positionality, they are not owned by me in any absolute sense. Once articulated, they enter a broader discursive space, where they may be re-read, recontextualized, and reinterpreted through other theoretical and methodological perspectives, and through the engagements of future readers and researchers.

[47] S. Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in S. Hall, J. Evans, S. Nixon (eds.), *Representation*, 2nd edn., London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013, p.19.

4.3. Analytical method, semiotics, and iconography

The methodological approach applied in this thesis combines semiotic analysis, rooted in cultural studies, with iconographic analysis, drawn from art history. This interdisciplinary framework enables a nuanced interpretation of protest banners, capturing their visual character, symbolic dimensions, and the deeper instinctive meaning that these visuals carry.

4.3.1. Semiotics

Semiotics is "the science of signs".[48] "It is concerned with how meaning is made and how reality is represented (and indeed constructed) through signs, sign systems, and processes of signification."[49] Applying semiotic analysis in this study enables a critical examination of how meaning is communicated, challenged, and produced through visual protest material.

At its core, semiotics is concerned with signs, broadly defined as anything that "stands for" or represents something else. A sign can take the form of a word, image, sound, object, or gesture, anything that can be interpreted as signifying something beyond itself.[50]

In this thesis, the signs under investigation are symbols. According to the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, a symbol is "a sign that represents or refers to something in an arbitrary, conventional way" and constitutes "any sign referring to an abstract notion".[51]

However, signs themselves cannot fix meaning. Instead, meaning arises from the relationship between a signifier (the form a sign takes, such as a word or image) and the signified (the concept it evokes in the mind), a relationship that is stabilized by a code. Codes are culturally shared systems of meaning that determine how signs are interpreted. Meaning is therefore relational, shaped by broader systems of cultural conventions, values, and expectations. Crucially, the connection between signifier and signified is not permanently fixed; on the contrary, it is historically contingent and subject to change. As cultural contexts shift, so too does the conceptual map through which a society classifies and understands the world. Different cultures, and the same culture at different historical moments, may assign different meanings to the same sign.[52]

[48]D. Chandler, *Semiotics. the basics*, 4th edn., New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 3.
[49]D. Chandler, *Semiotics. the basics*, 4th edn., New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 2.
[50]D. Chandler, *Semiotics. the basics*, 4th edn., New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 2.
[51]M. Danesi, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics, Media and Communications,* London, University of Toronto Press, 2000, p.221.
[52]S. Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in S. Hall, J. Evans, S. Nixon (eds.), *Representation*, 2nd edn., London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013, pp.16-17.

4.3.2. Roland Barthes' model of signification

The semiotic framework employed in this study is grounded in Roland Barthes' model of signification, which distinguishes between two levels of signification: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the first, basic level of meaning, the literal or descriptive aspect of a sign, where it is recognized and named. Connotation, the second level, goes beyond the literal and engages with the cultural and ideological associations that become attached to the sign. At this level, meaning is shaped by the wider semantic fields of a culture, linking the sign to broader symbolic structures such as national identity, historical memory, or social values. Connotative meaning is not as immediate or obvious as denotation; rather, it emerges through cultural interpretation. Barthes[53] describes this second level of signification as "more general, global, and diffuse," dealing with "fragments of an ideology". Thus, these meanings are not neutral; they are deeply embedded in the value systems, beliefs, and conceptual frameworks that structure how participant in a culture sees themselves and their world.[54]

This two-level model of signification provides a valuable lens through which to analyze the visual language of protest banners. It allows for a reading of symbols not only in terms of what they depict but also in terms of the ideological, emotional, and historical meanings they evoke within Polish culture. Through this framework, signs are identified at the denotative level and examined and described at the connotative level, revealing how protest imagery communicates complex cultural narratives and participates in the signification process.

4.3.3. Iconography

Additionally, the study draws on the work of Erwin Panofsky, "arguably the most influential art historian of the twentieth century."[55] Panofsky's innovation was to bring rigorous visual analysis into the broader context of cultural meaning, viewing artworks as "frozen pieces of history" that reveal both conscious and unconscious beliefs. His work resembled cultural detective work; seeking connections, decoding, and explaining. As Holly notes, he was "a cultural historian who merely discovered a new field for the application of his theories."[56] His

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[53]R. Barthes, *The Element of Semiology, London*, Cape, 1967, pp.91-92.

[54]S. Hall, 'The Work of Representation', in S. Hall, J. Evans, S. Nixon (eds.), *Representation*, 2nd edn., London, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013, pp.22-23.

[55] M. Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Cornell University Press, London, 1984, p.23.

[56] M. Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Cornell University Press, London, 1984, p.27.

method blends the precision of close observation with a wider interpretive lens, making it well-suited to this thesis, which draws from his model of iconography.

Panofsky's model distinguishes between three interrelated levels of meaning in visual analysis: pre-iconographic level (primary or natural subject matter), which involves identifying forms and recognising them as artistic motifs, iconographic level (secondary or conventional subject matter), involving the association/connection of motifs with themes or concepts, thus description and classification of an image, and iconological level (intrinsic meaning or content), that involves dealing "with the work of art as a symptom of something else, which expresses itself in a countless variety of other symptoms, and we interpret its compositional and iconographical features as more particularized evidence of this "something else".[57] Thus, iconology is a discovery and interpretation of the symbolic values and underlining logic of an image.[58]

Panofsky states that "iconology is a method of interpretation that arises from synthesis rather than analysis",[59] involving synthesis of the three interrelated levels of meaning, with iconological interpretation being predicated on the pre-iconographic and iconographic descriptions.

4.3.4. Mixed Methods

However, since this thesis adopts a mixed-methods approach situated at the intersection of semiotics, cultural studies, and political analysis, iconological interpretation is here grounded in the semiotic categories of denotation and connotation, as developed by Roland Barthes.

Panofsky's model of the three levels of interpretation (pre-iconographic, iconographic, and iconological) was originally developed to analyze artworks within the field of art history. While protest banners are treated in this thesis as a mode of visual expression that constitutes a form of political language, their artistic qualities are not the focus of inquiry. What matters instead is their symbolic and communicative function within protest culture and political discourse. Thus, rather than analysing artistic motifs and describing and classifying an image, the attention is shifted to the semiotics and two levels of signification (denotation and connotation).

[57] E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts,* Garden City, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, p.31.
[58] E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts,* Garden City, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, pp.28-31.
[59] E. Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts,* Garden City, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, p.32.

The reason for this is that semiotic analysis enables the visual language of protest banners to be examined by "reading" their symbols and describing and interpreting their meanings, which in turn provides the basis for iconological interpretation of the creative re-appropriation of national symbols. Following Panofsky, interpretation is understood here as a synthesis rather than analysis, where each element, denotation, connotation, and iconological interpretation, contributes to a holistic understanding of the protest imagery. However, the elements of this interpretative synthesis are modified through the integration of mixed methods to more effectively address the research question. Applying mixed methods allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by capturing insights that might be missed through a single-method design.[60] The methodological integration strengthens the analytical capacity of the study by bridging disciplinary boundaries and engaging with visual, symbolic, and political dimensions of protest culture.

Additionally, as stated by Holly, “semiotics and iconology share an interest in uncovering the deep structure of cultural products”.[61] Consequently, both offer valuable tools for interpreting visual materials that are rich in symbolic meaning. While semiotics focuses on the structures and systems of signs, often abstracted from historical context, iconology emphasizes the cultural and historical conditions that shape visual meaning. Thus, in this thesis, semiotics and iconology are treated as complementary: semiotic analysis enables a detailed examination of how protest banners communicate through signs and codes, while iconological interpretation situates these signs within broader cultural, political, and historical narratives and uncovers underlying meaning. Mixing these methods allows for a more layered and contextually grounded reading of banners, one that accounts for both the internal logic of signification and the external forces that shape meaning. In this way, the interdisciplinary framework not only reflects the complexity of the material but also supports a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of visual protest culture.

4.3.5. Operatioanalisation

To operationalise the connection between iconographic analysis in semiotics and my theoretical framework, I interpret the protest banners through the embeddedness of re-appropriated national symbols and their artistic motifs within Polish cultural tradition.

[60] G. D. Caruth, *Demystifying Mixed Methods Research Design: A Review of the Literature*, Mevlana International Journal of Education, vol. 3, no. 2 (August 2013), p. 112.
[61] M. Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Cornell University Press, London, 1984, p.181.

These symbols, understood as iconic within the Polish cultural and societal context, have come to embody ideological and mythical layers in their culturally specific representations.

In this way, they transcend the two basic levels of signification (denotation and connotation) and operate within what Roland Barthes identifies as the second-order semiological system: myth. In *Myth Today*, Barthes argues that myth functions by stripping signs of their historical and political specificity, transforming them into naturalised carriers of dominant ideology. National symbols, slogans, and visual motifs, once included in this mythical register, no longer seem constructed; they appear self-evident, natural, and timeless. Within the mythic framework, these symbols are seen as belonging exclusively to the realm of the 'true' patriotism. Myth does not lie explicitly, but rather distorts meaning by concealing the processes of its construction, thereby legitimising specific ideological positions.[62]

Consequently, the feminist re-appropriations of these symbols constitute acts of cultural and political resistance. It disrupts the myth by exposing its constructedness and reintroducing multiplicity into meaning. Through creative re-appropriation, protest banners reinsert national symbols into the first-order semiological system, restoring their historical, political, and cultural complexity. In doing so, they resist the hegemony over meaning imposed by nationalist ideology and open up space for diversity of meanings, interpretations, perspectives, and, notably, creativity. Creativity here becomes political. It challenges the reductive nature of myth and reinstates the expressive, dynamic, and diverse character of meaning-making.

The banners, therefore, do more than express opposition; they become sites of discursive struggle. They function as counter-narratives that confront dominant ideological structures, especially the mythologised discourse of Polish nationalism. Within the framework of this thesis, the ideological clash between nationalism and feminism is conceptualised as a conflict between two distinct semiological systems. Nationalism, operating within the mythic register, frames meaning as fixed, divine, unchangeable, and morally absolute. Feminism, by contrast, engages a constructivist understanding, treating meaning as contingent, negotiated, historically situated, and open to reinterpretation.

Notably, all of this is happening within the context of Polish culture. Protest banners are situated within the semantic field of Polish cultural memory, engaging with established

[62]R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, The Noonday Press, New York, 1972, pp. 109-143.

symbolic structures such as national identity, historical narratives, and social norms. Simultaneously, they introduce new symbolic codes, those of feminism and herstory, into the national discourse. These creative interventions do not merely oppose the dominant cultural narrative; they expand its symbolic boundaries.

4.4. Material

In this sub-chapter, the character of the materials used for the analysis will be investigated, and the Archive of Public Protests will be introduced. Additionally, the selection of the material and the application of the concept of cultural re-appropriation for this purpose will be presented.

4.4.1. Character of the material

Materials used in the analysis are photographs taken during *Strajk Kobiet* protests as captured by the A-P-P (Archive of Public Protests) photographers and as available in their online archive.

The analysied material consists of photographic images. However, the focus is not on the photographs as photographic works in their own right. Instead, the analysis centers on the banners depicted within these images. Elements such as the individuals holding the banners, their emotions, age, the dynamics of the protest as captured in the image, as well as photographic choices like composition or frame, are not the focus of this study. The primary interest lies in what the photographs document; the visual content captured by APP photographers and subsequently archived and categorized. The focus is on the content and indexical quality of the images; that is, what they reveal as direct visual traces of the protest. Drawing on Roland Barthes, photography is approached as a record of "the body that stood before the camera," emphasizing its capacity to serve as visual evidence.

However, photographs are not exact replications of reality. While they serve as evidence of what appeared before the camera at a specific moment, they are shaped by framing, timing, perspective, and the photographer's intent. They also reflect the social conditions of their production and circulation. Rather than offering a perfect mimesis, photographs construct a version of reality shaped by the context in which they were created; here, the context is the Archive of Public Protest.

4.4.2. Archive of Public Protests

A-P-P is a collective of photographers and publicists, established in 2019, documenting protests in Poland after the year 2015. The archive has been collecting visual traces of social activism and grassroots initiatives opposing political decisions and breaches of democratic norms and human rights. The creators say that the collection warns against rising right-wing populism and broad discrimination, including xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, and the climate crisis. By establishing the archive, its creators aim to preserve and prolong the life of images linked to specific events. All the photographs are gathered in a single, accessible collection that remains open for researchers, artists, and activists. The collective rejects objectivity as a myth, emphasizing that photographs are not created in a vacuum. While photography can serve as evidence or description, decisions around framing, timing, and publication are inherently subjective, shaped by the collective's commitment to their mission.[63]

This has implications for the subjectivity of the analysis, as my engagement with the archive will inevitably influence my approach. Additionally, the archive dictates what materials are there for me to analyze. Thus, inevitably, the work of photographers and their commitment and mission will have an effect on my interpretations of the protest banners and will further limit my interpretations. Despite the inherent subjectivity of photography, the photographers' human rights orientation, transparency, and clearly stated mission help to contextualize and balance this limitation. A-P-P documents abuses of power, human rights violations, and democratic struggles through images of public protests, forming what can be seen as a Human Rights and Activist Archive. Unlike traditional state archives, it centers visibility and testimony, especially of marginalized groups, offering alternative narratives that might otherwise be overlooked.[64]

Therefore, the context in which the photographs were created, the human rights-driven character of the archive, and the inherently subjective nature of both photographic and interpretive work must all be considered as integral to the analysis. These factors shape not only what is visible in the images but also how the protests are remembered, understood, and situated within broader struggles for justice and visibility.

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[63]Archive of Public Protests, "Information," *Archive of Public Protests* (Archive of Public Protests, accessed 12 August 2025).

[64]Hongsaton Zackari, K. *Framing the Subjects: Human Rights and Photography in Contemporary Thai History*. 1st ed. [Doctoral thesis, Department of History]. MediaTryck Lund, 2020.

4.4.3. Selection of material

The material was drawn from the Archive of Public Protests (A-P-P) and limited to five photographs of banners carried during protest waves organised under the banner of *Strajk Kobiet*. Images were located through the archive's online catalogue by using its tags for women's rights mobilisations, in particular "black protest", "women's strike", and "pro-choice". These filters produced the pool from which the final cases were chosen. Only images that clearly depict protest banners were considered; banners are understood broadly as hand-made or printed signs carried in public space, including placards, posters, prints, and flags.

Within this pool, attention was restricted to banners that engage national symbols. In this thesis, national symbols include both national symbols, thus signs that represent a nation's identity, heritage, history, and values, and nationalised religious symbols. This reflects the Polish context, where Catholic iconography and narratives have long been woven into national memory and identity, and where figures such as the Virgin Mary or the cross often function as signs of Polishness alongside the flag, the coat of arms, and patriotic slogans. Both visual and textual banners were considered. Most qualifying examples were visual. One text-led case was included where a patriotic slogan is reworked to operate symbolically in a way comparable to visual icons.

The final selection was made by operationalising the concept of creative re-appropriation. Creative re-appropriation of national symbols, as used here, means reclaiming and transforming dominant national or nationalised religious symbols so that their mythic register is interrupted and their meanings are reopened. In Barthes's terms, the symbol is pulled out of myth and returned to denotation and connotation; in a constructivist sense, meaning is shown to be made in use rather than given. The effect is to contest authority and to articulate alternative imaginaries of Polishness and womanhood through images that speak in a shared cultural code. Creativity is not restricted to inventing a wholly new form. It includes recontextualisation, recombination, re-captioning, and the audacity to place revered signs in unfamiliar settings.[65]

[65] E. Gaufman, 'The Gendered Iconography of the Belarus Protest', *New Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2021, pp. 80–89, pp. 81–83.

Recognition and selection followed four criteria. First, a recognised Polish national or nationalised religious symbol had to be present, for example, the flag, a patriotic slogan, Marian iconography, or the cross. Second, there had to be a visible act of re-appropriation, either by altering the symbol's form or by relocating it into a new context and coupling it with new elements; mere display of an unaltered emblem did not qualify. Third, the banner had to produce defamiliarisation, understood here as a perceptual jolt that makes the familiar appear strange and prompts interpretation beyond the literal. Fourth, the image needed to sustain layered meaning at the connotative level so that iconological reading could speak to wider cultural narratives. Preference was given to banners made and carried by individual protesters rather than centrally produced graphics or press materials, to foreground uncurated, participant-made interventions.

Applying these criteria yielded five images. Four come from the intense mobilisation following the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling and were photographed in Warsaw between 25 October 2020 and 28 January 2021. They include: the Black Madonna re-appropriation (02.11.2020, Warsaw, Rafał Milach); the crucifixion scene with the inverted Confiteor (25.10.2020, Warsaw, Wojtek Radwański); the weeping Madonna over the thunderbolt (28.01.2021, Warsaw, Rafał Milach); and the flag with the thunderbolt (13.12.2020, Warsaw, Rafał Milach). One banner comes from a later moment: the slogan "Honor and Glory to the Abortion Providers" photographed on 07.01.2024 at the "Last Call. Abortion available now!" protest in Warsaw (Rafał Milach).

These choices carry limitations. All images were taken in Warsaw and by two photographers, which reflects the archive's coverage and availability at the time of selection and introduces location and authorship bias. The set does not capture banners that reject national symbols altogether, and it does not map frequency or distribution across protests. Photographs also frame and mediate what is visible. What the corpus offers instead is a tightly defined group of analytically rich cases in which the mechanisms of creative re-appropriation, and especially the role of defamiliarisation, are clearly at work. The predominance of late-2020 material is a strength for this study, since prior literature identifies this period as a decisive moment of mass mobilisation and emotion; it is also the context in which boundary-testing banners were especially visible. The 2024 example adds contrast by registering a different protest atmosphere while remaining within the same symbolic field.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

This thesis uses publicly available photographs from the Archive of Public Protests under its non-commercial terms of use. Images are reproduced solely for research and education, are credited to the photographers and the Archive, and are not altered in ways that change meaning or context. The integrity and social message of each photograph are preserved, and images are not placed in misleading settings.

Use of images that show faces and personal creative works is ethically justified because the events occurred in a public space and the authors have placed their photographs in a publicly accessible research archive expressly for non-commercial educational use. The analysis focuses on the banners as signs rather than on the identities of individuals. No attempts are made to identify, profile, or link people to external data, and no personal data beyond what is visible in the archive is processed. Where reasonable risk could arise, images are cropped, reproduced at the minimum necessary resolution, or omitted. This approach respects the archive's terms, protects the dignity of those depicted, and enables legitimate scholarly analysis.

5. Analysis

In this chapter, five photographs depicting protest banners will be analyzed. Evaluation of each banner will begin with a brief description of the banner in question. Following that, two aspects will be explored: the re-appropriated national symbols and their meanings within Polish culture will be described, and the new layer of significance created through the means of creative re-appropriation. All leading to the interpretation of the image as a whole and uncovering its underlying deeper meaning, given the protest context and the theoretical and methodological lens applied.

Across all five cases, certain core traits unify the banners. Each banner incorporates well-recognized national symbols and removes them from their traditional, state-sanctioned, or religious contexts. These symbols are then placed within the visual and ideological framework of the women's rights protest, radically altering their conventional associations. In doing so, the banners create a strong sense of defamiliarization, prompting new interpretations.

The symbolic tension between the original meanings and the new layer of significance is central to how these protest banners function. During the process of analysis, it became evident that the banners vary both in their approach to the original symbols and in the extent to which they transform the meanings of the symbol in question. This led to the development of two distinct categories that help structure the discussion: layered re-appropriation and transformative re-appropriation.

Layered re-appropriation refers to those banners in which the original national symbol remains present and keeps its traditional associations, but is overlaid with new symbolic elements. These additions create a second new layer of significance, generating a tension between meanings and contexts of application. In these cases, the symbol is not destroyed or rejected, but rather reclaimed and reinterpreted. This type of appropriation creates visuals in which the original and the novel meanings coexist.

Transformative re-appropriation, by contrast, involves a more radical departure from the original symbol. While the new imagery still references the original symbol and its associations, it does so not to build upon the existing meaning, but rather uses that meaning as a point of departure to construct an entirely new one. These creative reworkings result in symbols that appear visually or thematically similar to the originals, but function in stark opposition to them. The original meaning is not preserved, but rather subverted or dismantled in order for a new message to emerge. In this way, the original symbol becomes a framework to critique, reject, or expose the ideology it once represented, allowing a new and oppositional meaning to take its place.

This analysis will proceed by first examining three banners as a form of layered re-appropriation and then proceeding with the two cases of transformative re-appropriation. This progression from layered to transformative examples will allow for a nuanced exploration of how protest visuals engage with and contest dominant national narratives.

5.1. Layered Re-Appropriation

This sub-chapter evaluates banners that have been described as a layered re-appropriation. It will begin with the most straightforward case: the re-appropriation of the Polish national flag, which serves as a clear example of layering symbolic meanings. This will be followed by a more complex analysis of two banners involving Marian iconography: the re-appropriation of the Black Madonna icon and the image of the crying Madonna. Given that the Virgin Mary

holds the status of a 'master symbol' in Polish culture, these examples will require significant contextual unpacking.

5.1.1. Polish flag with a Lightning Bolt

This image depicts the Polish national flag with the red thunder imprinted on top of it.

Symbolic meaning of the Polish national flag

The Polish national flag, featuring white and red horizontal stripes, is a powerful symbol of Polish statehood, identity, and independence. Its colours derive from the Polish coat of arms, a white eagle on a red background, first recorded as early as the 12th century. Traditionally, white represents purity, honor, and nobility, while red symbolizes bravery, sacrifice, and the bloodshed endured in the fight for freedom. Although these colours had been associated with Poland for centuries, the red-and-white flag was officially adopted as the national flag in 1919, following the country's regained independence.[66]

Rooted in national pride and remembrance, the flag evokes a strong sense of unity and collective identity. However, in times of political polarisation, its meaning has become contested. For some, the flag embodies Catholic, conservative, and nationalist ideals, while for others, it stands for democracy, civic rights, and resistance.

[66] *Culture.pl*, "The Polish Flag: Everything You've Ever Wanted to Know," *(Culture.pl*, accessed 12 August 2025).

New layer of significance

In this case of creative re-appropriation of the national flag, new significance is created by placing a red thunder, a symbol of the *Strajk Kobiet*, onto the flag. This constitutes a clear case of layered re-appropriation: the national flag remains intact and visually legible, but acquires new meaning through the addition of a symbol rooted in feminist protest.

The Red Thunder

The red thunder is a visual symbol that accompanied the Strajk Kobiet almost from the very beginning. It stands for a manifestation of anger and resistance to the withdrawal of women's fundamental human right to decide for themselves.[67] The creator of the symbol, Ola Jasinowska, has been developing the visual identity of the movement since 2016, and that year she created a poster that became its logo. It depicted a black profile of a woman with contrasting red lighting and a white sign 'Strajk Kobiet' (Women's Strike).

The red thunder became an iconic symbol of the protests. Its simple form for replication made it the most distributed, used, and distinctive symbol. The author explained that she used red lighting to refer to a symbol of warning. Additionally, the red lightning bolt was intended to contrast with the static profile of the woman (...) and create something universal that

[67]A. Sosnowska, 'Don't Ask for my Blood, Poland! Pro-choice protests and the visuality of women's blood', *Performance Research*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2023, p.91.

women can identify with regardless of where they live, their character, or their style of expression.[68]

Interpretation

In this act of creative re-appropriation, the emblem of *Strajk Kobiet* is imprinted onto one of the most powerful symbols of Polish statehood and independence, the national flag. The result is a signifying site where the meaning of the original symbol exists in tension with the new one layered upon it. This symbolic tension lies at the heart of the image's political force: the flag's associations with national unity, sacrifice, and historical struggle confront the thunderbolt's connotations of feminist anger, resistance, and urgent warning.

The Polish flag with the thunderbolt is thus a striking example of visual reclamation. By placing the emblem of the women's movement onto the nation's most recognisable symbol, protesters assert their claim to Polish identity and directly challenge the nationalist assumption that such symbols belong exclusively to one side of the political spectrum. In the current cultural climate, where Polishness is frequently equated with Catholicism, heteronormativity, and traditional gender roles, the image destabilises these associations. It confronts both the political control of women's bodies and the restrictive definitions of who is included in the national community.

From the perspective of Stuart Hall's model of representation, the banner illustrates how meaning is not fixed but rather negotiated within a shared cultural framework. The flag and thunderbolt are each readily legible in Polish culture, yet their combination forces the viewer to reinterpret both. The banner engages the symbolic grammar of patriotism to subvert its exclusivity, reframing it as an inclusive civic patriotism in which women's rights are integral to the vision of the nation.

This layering does more than signal opposition; it elevates the *Strajk Kobiet* emblem itself into a patriotic symbol. By doing so, it disrupts the male-dominated narrative of patriotism and reclaims the flag as a space of both national belonging and feminist resistance. The coexistence of the thunderbolt and the flag asserts that one can be simultaneously Polish and feminist, rejecting the nationalist myth, which Barthes would call a second-order semiological system that defines Polishness as the sole property of conservative or

[68] A. Sosnowska, 'Don't Ask for my Blood, Poland! Pro-choice protests and the visuality of women's blood', *Performance Research*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2023, p. 91.

fundamentalist forces. Instead, it proposes that the identity of the nation must be shaped by all its citizens.

Seen in this light, the act of placing the thunderbolt on the flag becomes a call to reclaim Polish identity from those who wield nationalism as a tool of exclusion. It reframes the defence of women's rights, democracy, and dignity not as a betrayal of the nation, but as an act of love and responsibility towards it. By positioning itself against the current exclusionary form of nationalism, often weaponised to silence dissent, the banner offers a counter-vision of Polishness rooted in solidarity, care, and democratic values rather than ethno-religious homogeneity.

What emerges is a form of feminist patriotism: a love of country that is critical, transformative, and inclusive. It honours the past while reshaping national belonging to reflect the diverse realities and aspirations of its people. The reimagined flag does not erase the original meaning of the national symbol; it enriches it, embedding it in a new struggle. In doing so, the banner becomes a semiotic battleground, a site where competing visions of national identity are visually negotiated. Speaking in both the language of nationalism and the language of resistance, it generates a productive tension that invites not only conflict over meaning but also reflection on the assumptions underpinning that meaning.

In this sense, the banner exemplifies layered re-appropriation: the visual integrity of the national flag is preserved, but its meaning is reconfigured and expanded. As Hall describes, it becomes a "site of struggle" in which past and present conceptions of nationhood collide and coexist in an uneasy yet generative tension.

5.1.2. Black Madonna Icon with Balaclava and Eight Stars

Next, the analysis turns to two cases of creative re-appropriation involving Marian iconography. Because the Virgin Mary holds a central and deeply layered place in Polish cultural and religious symbolism, this section will devote considerable attention to outlining her traditional significance. The first case, the re-appropriation of the Black Madonna icon, is among the most complex analyses in the thesis and will shed light on Mary's pivotal role within the Polish symbolic framework. This foundation will, in turn, make the interpretation of the second Marian re-appropriation clearer and more nuanced.

The banner in question contains a modified version of the Black Madonna icon. On the banner, both the Madonna and the Christ child are depicted wearing black balaclavas. Additionally, eight stars encircle Mary's halo.

Symbolic Meaning of the Virgin Mary and the Black Madonna Icon

In Polish culture, Mary holds a unique and deeply embedded position as what scholars describe as a ‘master symbol’. This symbolic power comes from her ability to bridge two interconnected spheres: the intimate realm of private religious devotion and the broader national myth that positions her as the Queen and protector of the Polish nation. [69]

In the context of personal faith, the Marian cult in Poland is exceptionally strong. Mary is often seen as a sorrowful, compassionate mother, someone who understands human suffering and offers comfort in times of hardship. She functions not only as a religious figure but also as a maternal archetype, echoing older Slavic cultural associations that link the mother figure to fertility, nature, and protection.[70]

[69]C. de Busser, and A. Niedźwiedź , ‘Mary in Poland: A Polish Master Symbol’, in A-K. Hermkens, W. Jansen and C. Notermans (eds.), *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Routledge, 2009), p.87.

[70] C. de Busser, and A. Niedźwiedź , ‘Mary in Poland: A Polish Master Symbol’, in A-K. Hermkens, W. Jansen and C. Notermans (eds.), *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Routledge, 2009), pp.94-97.

In the context of national mythology, the symbolism of Mary as a patriotic figure and protector of the Polish nation was built around the Black Madonna icon, which the banner re-appropriates. The icon is surrounded by a myth, according to which Mary assisted Polish people in almost every crucial moment of their national history. The origin of the myth is the Battle of Jasna Góra (1655), in which, according to legend, the divine assistance of Mary conquered the Swedish army during a siege of the monastery. The miracle in which Mary is believed to have defended the monastery led to the proclamation of Mary the Queen of the Polish Crown in 1656 by King Jan Kazimierz.[71]

In the 19th century, the Monastery in Częstochowa grew significantly as a nationally oriented religious center,[72] and the figure of Mary emerged as a central symbol of the Polish resistance movements during the Partitions Period (1795-1918).[73] Mary, associated with victory in the Battle of Jasna Góra, was elevated to Queen of the Poles and to Hetmanka, the commander-in-chief of the Polish armed forces, who could unite people from the three different partitioned regions.[74] Her scarred face, said to bear the wounds of an attempted desecration, came to symbolize shared suffering and divine solidarity with the oppressed nation.[75]

This symbolic power endured through the communist era, when Marian imagery and pilgrimages offered both spiritual empowerment and powerful instruments of civic resistance. The Black Madonna stood as a maternal protector and a "true ruler" of Poland, opposing state power and enabling Catholic communities to assert an alternative national identity rooted in faith and historical continuity.[76]

[71] C. de Busser, and A. Niedźwiedź , 'Mary in Poland: A Polish Master Symbol', in A-K. Hermkens, W. Jansen and C. Notermans (eds.), *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Routledge, 2009), p.88.

[72] A. Niedźwiedź, 'Constructing Mary through Pilgrimages: Lived Catholic Mariology in Poland', *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 11, 2023, p.9.

[73] The territories of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth were gradually partitioned by neighboring powers—the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Habsburg Monarchy—in three successive partitions between 1772 and 1795. As a result, Poland vanished from the map of Europe for 123 years, reemerging as an independent state only in 1918

[74] C. de Busser, and A. Niedźwiedź , 'Mary in Poland: A Polish Master Symbol', in A-K. Hermkens, W. Jansen and C. Notermans (eds.), *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Routledge, 2009), p.89.

[75] A. Niedźwiedź, 'Constructing Mary through Pilgrimages: Lived Catholic Mariology in Poland', *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 11, 2023, p.8.

[76] A. Niedźwiedź, 'Constructing Mary through Pilgrimages: Lived Catholic Mariology in Poland', *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 11, 2023, pp.8-9.

Thus, throughout most of Polish history, Mary has served as a counter-symbol to illegitimate or foreign rule, effectively excluding the official authorities from the spiritual life of the nation.

This dynamic changed with the establishment of an independent democratic Polish state. What could be observed is that Mary was being gradually incorporated into the iconography of the Polish state and that of Polish nationalism.[77]

Marian symbolism, once associated with resistance and unity, became embedded in nationalist iconography, reinforcing the authority of Catholic institutions and legitimizing conservative, right-wing politics. Absorbed into the national myth, Mary was stripped of historical context and reimagined as a timeless emblem of "true" Polishness, naturalizing the ideological fusion of Catholicism, nationalism, and conservative agendas. Thus, from a symbol of resistance and unity, she was transferred into a symbol used to legitimize the power of those who became seen as representatives of 'true Polishness'.

No longer a symbol of resistance, Marian imagery was repurposed to rally opposition against perceived internal and external threats, as defined by religious-nationalist discourse. These included secularism, Western liberalism, the European Union, feminism, 'gender ideology', LGBTQ+ communities, and non-Christian immigrants.[78] The Black Madonna, once a spiritual unifier, was thus transformed into a symbol of exclusion, marking the boundaries of national identity and signaling a political vision for the country.

Now embraced by fundamentalist currents, Mary has become a contested figure. For many outside the dominant religious-national paradigm, she represents not solace but institutional power. This symbolic tension has deepened since 2015, as national-Catholic ideologies have come to dominate public discourse.[79]

<u>New Layer of Significance</u>

In this case of creative re-appropriation, the original Black Madonna icon is altered by covering the faces of both Mary and the Christ child with black balaclavas, while Mary's

[77] C. de Busser, and A. Niedźwiedź , 'Mary in Poland: A Polish Master Symbol', in A-K. Hermkens, W. Jansen and C. Notermans (eds.), *Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimage in the Modern World* (Routledge, 2009), p..97.

[78] A. Niedźwiedź, 'Constructing Mary through Pilgrimages: Lived Catholic Mariology in Poland', *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 11, 2023, pp.13-14.

[79] A. Niedźwiedź, 'Constructing Mary through Pilgrimages: Lived Catholic Mariology in Poland', *Religions*, vol. 14, no. 11, 2023, pp.13-15.

areola is encircled by eight stars. Each element, the balaclavas and the stars, carries its own symbolic significance, adding new layers of meaning to the traditional image.

Balaclava

Balaclavas have a military history and are still very much associated with violence. They are commonly worn to conceal the identity of individuals committing acts that require anonymity, including police and military forces. In the context of the protest, covering a face is a symbolically powerful act of resistance and solidarity. It protects participants from surveillance, expresses civil disobedience, and offers safety, especially for those vulnerable to retaliation. Masking also reflects distrust in authorities, making anonymity a key strategy where dissent may lead to repression or expressing solidarity with those more endangered to face retaliation.[80] However, it can also provoke suspicion, as concealment is often associated with criminal intent.

Beyond their military origins and associations with anonymity in protest, balaclavas have also become powerful symbols within social movements, particularly feminist resistance, carrying a distinct aesthetic and political charge. They evoke a sense of collective resistance and identity, channeling female rage.[81] One of the most iconic uses of the balaclava in feminist protest comes from a radical feminist performance band and art group from Russia called Pussy Riot, which gained international recognition, and their handmade colorful balaclavas became a global symbol of feminist resistance.[82] As Mary on the banner is depicted wearing a classical black balaclava, the association with the aesthetic and symbolism of Pussy Riot is not obvious. However, the contextual backgrounds of both the banner and the performance relate to the protest in relation to the entanglement of religious and political power at the expense of women's rights, and both directly address Mary as part of this resistance.[83]

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[80] A. Moule, 'The Significance of a Balaclava', *Also Cool* [web blog], 26 February 2022, accessed 19 May 2025

[81] A. Moule, 'The Significance of a Balaclava', *Also Cool* [web blog], 26 February 2022, accessed 19 May 2025

[82] C. Bruce, 'The Balaclava as Affect Generator: Free Pussy Riot Protests and Transnational Iconicity', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 12.1 (2014), p.44.

[83] Pussy Riot in their famous prayer address Mary by asking her: '*Virgin Mary, Mother of God, become a feminist.'* Moreover, they end their prayer with *'Mother of God, is with us in protest! Virgin Mary, Mother of God, put Putin away.*

Eight Stars

Additionally, eight stars are arranged around Mary's halo, a detail that adds additional meaning and symbolism. Following the 2020 Constitutional Tribunal ruling in Poland, one of the most prominent protest slogans was *"Jebać PiS"* ("Fuck PiS"), a direct expression of anger toward the ruling party. To evade censorship, the phrase was often stylized as eight stars (********), a format that quickly became an iconic shorthand for resistance, appearing on banners, in graffiti, across social media, and even in protest songs.

Placing eight stars within Mary's halo creates a striking juxtaposition: the sacred imagery of the halo, traditionally representing sanctity and divine light around the head of a divine or sanctified person,[84] is disrupted by the implicit vulgarity of the protest slogan.

Interpretation

At first glance, the deployment of Mary, a sacred and deeply national figure, in a pro-abortion women's rights protest may appear paradoxical or even provocative. The appropriation of such a potent religious symbol inevitably evokes strong emotional and cultural reactions. Yet, as literary sources illustrate, Mary, and specifically the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, occupies a central role in Polish collective memory and symbolic imagination. Her role as Hetmanka (commander-in-chief), Queen of Poland, and the spiritual protector of the oppressed, means she has functioned historically as a symbol of resistance: from defending Catholic Poles during the Swedish Deluge to embodying anti-Communist struggle under Soviet-backed rule. Thus, this creative re-appropriation is far from surprising, given Mary's longstanding role as a powerful symbol of resistance that is deeply embedded in Polish collective memory. From this perspective, invoking her image within the women's rights movement facing authoritarian backsliding emerges as a natural and coherent extension of her symbolic legacy.

Thus, the image's use in a feminist protest does not constitute a rupture from the icon's symbolic meanings but rather a continuation of them, although one that challenges dominant interpretation and illustrates the mythical dimension this symbol has taken. What the banner is a symptom of is not an implementation of symbols from outside Polish symbolic culture or the creation of counter culture, but an internal, critical reworking of one of its core icons. As

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[84]J. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, Taylor & Francis, 2020, p. 148.

such, this Marian re-appropriation should be seen as an act of cultural dialogue: using an existing ‘master symbol’ to communicate a contemporary feminist resistance.

The banner works through defamiliarization, the intentional collision of sacred iconography with symbols associated with protest, criminality, and dissent. Mary’s face, covered under a black balaclava, evokes associations with hooliganism, radical activism, and violence. In Catholic iconography, Mary’s compassionate gaze represents openness, maternal presence, and divine intimacy. Here, the appropriation of her image challenges the viewer to reconsider who Mary is and what she stands for.

Importantly, this is not an act of iconoclasm but a reimagination that gives the icon a new meaning: Mary as one of the protesters. Covered by a balaclava, she becomes a symbol of civil disobedience, feminist rage, and solidarity, not passively praying for the people, but standing among them in defiance. The balaclava becomes a powerful metaphor for agency and protection. It also complicates the image, bridging associations with criminality and courage, repression and rebellion, danger and devotion. Mary is no longer only the suffering mother; she is the resisting mother, an icon of strength who challenges authority.

The balaclava’s association with militant resistance and criminality marks Mary as occupying a liminal space, straddling legality and defiance, civility and radical dissent. It underscores civil disobedience as a complex form of protest, embodying both vulnerability and strength.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic added further layers to this symbolism. In Autumn 2020, when the tribunal ruling was announced, mass gatherings were officially restricted, and legal justifications for curbing assemblies were hotly contested. Protesters faced police repression, detentions, and documented brutality, while support networks mobilized legal aid. Concealing one’s identity thus became an act of self-protection and agency. The balaclava transcended anonymity, becoming a symbol of refusal to be silenced amid repression. This also explains the strategic avoidance of the term “protest,” with gatherings rebranded as “walks” (spacery) to navigate legal constraints.

State-controlled media portrayed protesters as hooligans and lawbreakers, framing demonstrations as threats to social order and public health. Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the ruling PiS party, condemned the protests as nihilistic attacks on the Church and nation, reinforcing narratives delegitimizing civic dissent. Within this hostile climate, the banner’s

depiction of Mary in a black balaclava boldly counters dominant discourse by framing the protests as a defense of democracy and fundamental rights rather than criminal disorder.

The addition of eight stars, the shorthand for the protest slogan "Jebać PiS" ("Fuck PiS"), within Mary's halo adds a complex and ironic layer to the image's symbolic resonance. Traditionally, a halo sanctifies and elevates, signifying divine light and sanctity. Yet here, this sacred glow is repurposed to frame a vulgar, raw expression of public outrage, creating a striking tension between the sacred and the profane. This juxtaposition not only sanctifies rebellion itself but also visually articulates the emotions of the protesters, their outrage, and determination to challenge and transform the existing social and political order.

This creative re-appropriation of the Black Madonna icon has a provocative element to it, especially given that Mary's image is held sacred by many of the protest's ideological opponents. In this sense, her re-appropriation could be seen as a form of provocation or even desecration.

Yet, even in its most radical form, this reimagined Mary remains firmly rooted in the core cultural logic of Polish iconography. Mary is still maternal and still protective, but these qualities are not bound to submission or quite obedience. Instead, they are reshaped through a feminist lens, one that connects motherhood with agency, care with resistance, and tradition with transformation. This is Mary as a mother who defends her daughters. Mary is not a passive recipient of prayer, but an active participant in collective struggle.

Certainly, it is a disruption of the nationalist-religious claimed monopoly over Marian iconography, symbolic and meaning, reflecting that the meanings of Mary in contemporary Poland are not stable and that no group can hold a monopoly over what a symbol means to everyone else. As the previous sections have shown, Mary has been co-opted into nationalist, exclusionary politics; employed not only as a spiritual figure but also as a tool to define who belongs to the nation and who does not. Against this backdrop, reclaiming Mary as a symbol of radical inclusion, resistance, and feminism is not an act of blasphemy, but of ideological contestation. The banner becomes a counter-narrative, challenging dominant Marian imagery not by rejecting it, but by creatively reappropriating it and reinterpreting it.

In this way, the reimagined icon of the Black Madonna becomes less a rupture from tradition and more of a synthesis, a symbolic convergence of Poland's spiritual past and its contemporary reality that embodies what is understood as layered creative re-appropriation. It

reclaims a beloved national-religious figure for a new generation and a new struggle. Rather than replacing old meanings with new ones, it layers them, showing that resistance and reverence, protest and protection, anger and faith, can coexist in the same image, and in the same woman.

5.1.3. Virgin Mary Crying Over Red Thunder

Now the analysis turns to the layered creative re-appropriation of the image of the Virgin Mary and her tears, combined with the red thunder, symbol of *Strajk Kobiet*.

The banners in question feature the Virgin Mary, who can be identified by the woman in a veil and the aureole above her head. Notably, she is depicted crying with her tears falling on the symbol of *Strajk Kobiet*, the red thunder that appears beneath her.

Symbolic Meaning of Marian Tears

Tears of Mary have a symbolic meaning. Mary is often portrayed as crying over the fate of people and nations.[85] This is strongly connected to the cult of the Virgin Mary and its connection to Poland's national discourse. In the Polish national religious imagination Mary's sorrow is frequently interpreted as expressions of mourning over the nation's historical

[85]Łódź.tvp.pl,"Cud w Łodzi? Obraz Matki Bożej Częstochowskiej płacze", December 20, 2024, (accessed 12 August 2025).

tragedies, such as failed uprisings, partitions, wars, and the struggles for independence from foreign rule.[86] This connection between the sorrow of the Virgin Mary and national suffering reinforces a vision of Poland as a martyred, yet deeply religious nation under divine protection.

Additionally, the image of Mary as a suffering mother was used to build and uphold the role that women assumed during the partition period in Polish history. When they were seen as barriers to the patriotic mission of reproducing the nation, preserving the Polish language and culture, and providing patriotic education, and eventually sacrificing their sons to the national struggles, and glorifying their death for the nation. Their grief and loss were not only personal tragedies but also collective acts of national martyrdom that reinforced the legitimacy of the struggle for independence. The suffering of women was compared to the suffering of Mary, whose son sacrificed himself for salvation, just as Polish men were seen to be destined to sacrifice for the national cause.[87] Mary, in this narration, is seen as an ideal woman whom Polish women should strive to adhere to.[88] Thus, the tear of Mary in this context signifies the mother's suffering over the faith of her sons, who died in glory for the surrvial and the salvation of the nation.

Additionally, there are numerous reported Marian apparitions and miracles recognized by the Catholic Church, in which statues or images of Mary are said to have miraculously wept. Within Catholic tradition, these tears serve as a profound form of communication from Mary and a proof of her ongoing presence and intervention in human affairs. Marian miracles involving statues or images shedding tears have been reported worldwide, reinforcing the universal nature of this symbol. One of the most famous cases occurred in Akita, Japan, in the 1970s, where a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary was reported to have wept 101 times over several years. The tears were interpreted as a call to prayer, repentance, and warning of future hardships, echoing the themes common to Marian miracles globally.[89]

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[86] B. Porter-Szűcs, "Mary: power and motherhood" in *Faith and fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*, 1st edn., Warsaw, Filary, 2022.
[87] B. Porter-Szűcs, "Mary: power and motherhood" in *Faith and fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*, 1st edn., Warsaw, Filary, 2022.
[88] A. Graff, 'Claiming the Shipyard, the Cowboy Hat, and the Anchor for Women: Polish Feminism's Dialogue and Struggle with National Symbolism', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2019, p. 473.
[89] J. Ottea. Vox Domini, "Łzy Matki Bożej", (accessed August 12, 2024).

Recently, in 2024, a weeping statue of the Virgin Mary in Polish city Łódź attracted widespread attention.[90] Believers saw it as a powerful and urgent sign from Mary, calling the nation to reflect on ongoing social and political turmoil. The tears were widely interpreted as Mary's sorrow over the country's perceived moral decline and spiritual crisis, a plea for collective repentance, renewal, and a return to core religious and ethical values.[91] Although this event occurred after the protests and the creation of the banner, the interpretation of Marian tears illustrates how this symbol operates deeply within the Polish cultural and religious context. While church authorities did not officially confirm the phenomenon, it nonetheless underscored the enduring significance of Marian devotion in Poland's social and spiritual life.

New Layer of Significance

In this instance of creative re-appropriation, the image of Mary and her tears is combined with the representation of the red thunder, the iconic symbol of *Strajk Kobiet*, previously discussed in the analysis of the national flag's re-appropriation.

Interpretation

The banner uses the image and symbolism of the Virgin Mary and her tears, and depicts her crying over the red thunder, the most iconic and recognisable symbol of *Strajk Kobiet*. Unlike the previous Marian re-appropriation, this banner is less shocking and more thought-provoking. Its effect lies in defamiliarization, prompting viewers to reconsider what the Virgin Mary is mourning, whose side she supports in this struggle, and why pro-choice protesters would choose to invoke her image in their protest.

It seems that the power of this image lies in its subtle re-appropriation, with the Virgin Mary remaining the same saint, full of compassion, present and involved in human affairs, one who warns of future hardships, offers support and strength, and stands as a symbol of righteousness and moral clarity. What changes is not her identity, but the focus of her sorrow. In this banner, her tears are re-appropriated and reclaimed by the protesters, directed not toward a glorified national tragedy centered on male sacrifice, but toward the very real and current struggles of Polish women. As her tears fall on the red thunder, the symbol of *Strajk*

[90] Łódź.tvp.pl,"Cud w Łodzi? Obraz Matki Bożej Częstochowskiej płacze", December 20, 2024, (accessed 12 August 2025).
[91] RCTV. *"Co oznacza, gdy Maryja płacze?"*, YouTube video, December 23, 2024, 13:57.

Kobiet, she is portrayed as mourning the suffering, humiliation, devastation, anger, and sadness experienced by women in the face of political repression and systemic inequality.

Notably, Mary and her counterpart, the Polish Mother, have traditionally been depicted as mourning over the fate of her sons and the nation, reinforcing narratives of masculine heroism and national martyrdom. Compassion for the fate and suffering of daughters, however, has been largely absent or sidelined in these narratives. This banner disrupts that tradition by making women's pain visible and morally significant. In doing so, it reclaims Marian sorrow and compassion as a space for female experience, creating a powerful image that centers women's fate and well-being as worthy of national and spiritual attention.

This act of symbolic reconfiguration gives new meaning to the national lexicon of sorrow, sacrifice, and compassion, one long dominated by male suffering in service of the nation. By inserting women's struggles, dedication, and endurance into this symbolic framework, the banner reshapes what counts as national suffering and who is seen as its bearer. It signals the entry of the female gaze into the sacred and national imagination, demanding that women's experiences be recognized not as peripheral, but equally important to the moral and emotional life of the nation.

However, since Mary is traditionally seen as mourning the fate of the nation, this image also carries a layered meaning, one that suggests the protest movement arises at a decisive moment for Poland's fragile democracy. In this context, Mary can be interpreted as weeping not only for the suffering of women but also for the nation itself, as it faces increasing authoritarian backsliding. As the Queen of Poland, her sorrow may reflect the erosion of freedoms and the tightening grip of a government that is progressively undermining democratic values.

Moreover, the depiction of Mary crying over the red thunder is also a moral claim. By aligning the Virgin Mary's sorrow with the suffering of Polish women and the decline of democratic values, the image implicitly asserts that the protest is not only politically justified but ethically righteous. It reframes the movement as one grounded in compassion, moral responsibility, and concern for the common good, values traditionally associated with Mary herself. This subtle re-appropriation challenges the dominant narratives that frame the protesters as radical or immoral, and instead situates them as defenders of dignity, justice, and human rights. In doing so, the image suggests that those who stand against oppression and

injustice, especially in defense of women's autonomy and democratic freedoms, are, in fact, on the right side of history.

Such acts of symbolic reappropriation can be especially meaningful for Catholic women taking part in these protests. By merging Marian imagery with feminist symbolism, they assert their right to participate in both religious and civic life without sacrificing bodily autonomy. In this context, the tears of Mary might be understood not as grief over the nation's fate, but as sorrow for the choices forced upon Polish women, grief over a Church that demands they relinquish their autonomy to remain within its fold.

This duality reflects a deeper truth: *Strajk Kobiet* is not solely about reproductive rights. It is also a protest for the right to *religion without oppression* and freedom *from* religion's imposition on personal lives. Many protesters marched to declare their break from a Church that no longer represents them, while others marched as believers fighting for their place within that Church. The banner, then, becomes a visual manifestation of that tension and hope: it claims space within the religious tradition to challenge its exclusions and redefine its meanings.

5.2. Transformative Re-Appropriation

The second part of the analysis will turn to the category of transformative re-appropriation. Here, the focus will shift first to the image of a crucified woman, which represents an explicit visual transformation of a central Christian symbol into a feminist protest statement. Notably, besides the symbolic re-appropriation, there is a text of a prayer, functioning as part of a larger iconographic-symbolic construction that will be analyzed as such. Last but not least, the analysis will conclude with the re-appropriation of a patriotic slogan, which, while text-based, operates visually and symbolically in ways that disrupt and challenge its original nationalistic connotations.

5.2.1. Crucified Women

The banner contains an image of a crucified pregnant woman with a sign: 'Your fault! Your fault! Your very great fault!'. This visual is interpreted as a creative re-appropriation of the symbol of the crucifixion of Jesus and the Catholic prayer *Confiteor*.

While the crucifixion is an established visual symbol, the text of *Confiteor* belongs to the category of linguistic signs. Its inclusion in this analysis is justified by its comparable semiotic function: in the Polish cultural context, this prayer operates as a condensed, highly recognizable cultural code, capable of evoking shared connotations and ritualised emotional responses in much the same way as visual symbols.

Symbolic meaning of the Crucifixion

Crucifixion was one of the most brutal and humiliating forms of execution used in the Roman Empire, reserved for the most despised members of society. The crucifixion was supposed to strip the victim of dignity, symbolise social exclusion, and demonstrate the power of authority.[92]

The death of Christ on the cross is the central image in Christian art and the visual focus of Christian contemplation.[93]The crucifixion of Jesus holds deep symbolic meaning in Christian

[92]J. T. Squires, "Reading the Crucifixion as a Scene of Public Shaming", *John T. Squires* [blog], 26 March 2021, accessed 12 August 2025.
[93]J. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, Taylor & Francis, 2020, p..83

theology. He is believed to have died for the sins and salvation of humanity, offering himself as a sacrifice. His suffering is seen as profoundly significant: an act of ultimate love for the people he sought to save from condemnation. His image on the cross, as well as the cross itself, came to symbolise the redemption of humankind through Christ's sacrificial death.[94]

The cross also has a deep symbolic meaning, being the central Christian sign. It recalls Christ's sacrificial death and humanity's redemption. This Latin cross is read as the meeting of the vertical (divine) and horizontal (human) axes, holding life and death in tension. In practice, it signals hope and protection, often traced or worn against danger and temptation.[95]

Ritual and semiotic meaning of the Confoteor prayer

The Catholic prayer *Confiteor*, especially its most famous and rhythmically charged moment - the repeated phrase*"mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa"* ("my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault")- symbolises humility, personal responsibility, and the need for divine mercy. The threefold repetition intensifies the confession, while the public recitation affirms that sin is both personal and communal. It is a ritual act of laying aside pride, acknowledging one's faults before God and others, and opening the way to forgiveness. Accompanied by the physical gesture of touching the heart, it becomes a deeply embodied expression of sorrow, connecting the individual's inner remorse with an outward sign of penitence.

In semiotic terms, the prayer functions as a cultural shorthand for the act of confession itself, condensed into a fixed verbal form that operates iconically (through repetition and rhythm) and symbolically (through its conventionalised meaning). When visually embedded in a protest banner, it transcends purely linguistic function and takes on the status of a symbolic element in the composition.

Interpreatation

The banner is constructed through creative re-appropriation of the image of the crucified Jesus. Notably, the pregnant woman in the banner takes the place of Jesus on the cross. This banner is interpreted as a depiction of women's suffering under the newly passed ruling by presenting her agonizing death by crucifixion.

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[94]A. W. Steffler, *Symbols of the Christian Faith*, Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, p. 27.
[95] A. W. Steffler, *Symbols of the Christian Faith*, Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, p. 27.

The replacement of Jesus with a pregnant woman is interpreted as a reference to the meaning that is attached to Jesus' death by crucifixion. His suffering is seen as profoundly significant: an act of ultimate love for the people he sought to save from condemnation. This meaningful and chosen sacrifice is contrasted with the sacrifice expected from women in the post-tribunal ruling realities. Thus, the replacement of Jesus with a pregnant woman depicts how women are expected to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the nation. In nationalist mythology, women's life, health, and well-being are secondary to perceived duty in the salvation of the nation. This imagery critiques a vision of womanhood rooted in nationalist ideology. It is a criticism and protest against the idealisation of women's suffering and sacrifice. Additionally, it reveals the deeply rooted hierarchy in Polish society, where women are expected to serve the nation and subordinate themselves to its cause. As a result, women's rights, well-being, and agency are treated as secondary, negotiable, or expendable in the service of political agendas, ideological coherence, or perceived national survival. This dynamic not only marginalizes women but actively causes suffering, forcing them to bear the emotional, physical, and social costs of a system that refuses to recognize their full autonomy.

Additionally, the image portrays the woman as naked and crucified, stripped of autonomy and dignity. It visually captures how women are reduced to their bodies and confined to their role as reproducers of the nation. This mirrors the logic behind abortion restrictions, which frame women's social value primarily in terms of their biological ability to bear children. This logic has been institutionalized by the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling and embedded into state law. It not only subordinates women and controls their bodies, but also humiliates them, casting them as second-class citizens, unworthy of exercising full autonomy over their own lives and reproductive choices. Through this ruling, the role of women as reproducers of the nation was not only idealized but officially declared by the state. This image expresses this deeply felt subordination, humiliation, and denial of agency through the invocation of crucifixion.

Additionally, the depiction of women's suffering and death underscores the inhumanity of the ruling, caused by denying access to abortion in cases of severe fetal deformation. The stark portrayal of pregnant women's suffering highlights the reality that the ruling is not only a source of deep pain and humiliation but, in some cases, a death sentence. This aligns with international human rights rhetoric surrounding abortion and abortion bans. Amnesty International has stated that Poland's abortion ban violates the human rights of women and girls, including their rights to life, health, privacy, and information, as well as their right to be

free from torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and to equality and non-discrimination.[96] The banner vividly reflects these human rights concerns, making the consequences of the ruling visible and depicting the ruling as a torture practice.

Another layer of significance is added to the image through the banner's use of text referencing the Catholic prayer Confiteor, in which the faithful confess their sins by repeating, "mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa" ("my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault"). Here, the traditional act of personal confession is altered: the banner reads, "your fault, your fault, your very great fault." This reversal shifts the burden of guilt away from women and redirects it toward the Catholic Church and those complicit in upholding the structures that deny women autonomy. From a methodological perspective, the pairing of a re-appropriated visual symbol (the crucifixion) with a re-appropriated verbal formula (the prayer) creates a layered sign. The two components interact intertextually, reinforcing and intensifying each other's meanings. The verbal element operates visually on the banner, functioning alongside the crucifixion image as part of a single semiotic system rather than a separate text to be 'read' independently.

This re-appropriation exposes how responsibility for abortion and reproductive suffering is projected onto women. By twisting the sacred formula of confession, the banner accuses the Church itself of wrongdoing, suggesting that it, not the women it condemns, needs confession and absolution.

This critique is deepened through the use of the cross. Traditionally understood as a sign of hope, protection, and salvation, functioning as a talisman to aid and protect the faithful.[97] In this image, however, the cross no longer represents protection. Instead, it becomes a source of violence and suffering. By depicting the woman on the cross, the image re-appropriates the cross to confront its weaponization against women. It directly accuses the Catholic Church of being complicit in the suffering that women will endure under the new law, confronting it with the reality that women will die as a consequence of this legislation. The image lays the blame plainly at the Church's feet, portraying it as the moral and political force behind what amounts to state-sanctioned torture and death sentences.

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[96]Amnesty International, *Poland's Constitutional Tribunal Rolls Back Reproductive Rights*, 23 October 2020, accessed 12 August 2025.
[97] A. W. Steffler, *Symbols of the Christian Faith*, Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, p. 27.

Additionally, there is an element of irony in this creative re-appropriation of the crucifixion, next to the reversed confession prayer. Imperial and religious authorities crucified Jesus for challenging the existing social and political order. In a similar way, contemporary feminism is viewed in Poland as a threat to the structures of power and religious authority. Feminism, particularly in its defense of reproductive rights, challenges dominant narratives about women’s roles, sexuality, and moral obligation. As a result, women who assert bodily autonomy are met with resistance, judgment, and, in some cases, legal punishment. Just as the crucifixion served as a tool to suppress a perceived threat to the social order, so too do modern laws and policies, like abortion bans, function to control women and reinforce a hierarchical moral framework. In this context, women's health, well-being, and even their lives are treated as secondary to the ideological purity and authority of the state and church.

The irony lies in the fact that the very Christian authorities and political leaders who claim to act in the name of faith fail to recognize Jesus in the women who suffer and die under the weight of their laws. Similarly to Jesus, feminists are cast out and condemned, labeled as ‘immoral,’ ‘anti-Polish,’ or corrupted by foreign influence for challenging the moral and political status quo. This pattern of exclusion reveals a familiar mechanism of power: silencing dissent by framing it as a threat to the state’s and religious integrity. Today, this logic is echoed in the actions of the Polish Catholic Church and its alliance with a political party. The irony exposes not only hypocrisy but a calculated use of religion as a political tool, where moral ideals are invoked to consolidate authority, suppress resistance, and maintain control.

The banner is a striking example of transformative creative re-appropriation. While every element it contains is deeply familiar, their visual representations and meanings are radically transformed to convey something entirely different. There, the relation with the ‘original’ meaning is broken, and its tradition is abandoned. The original meanings are used as points of departure, but they are neither reclaimed nor their meanings enriched; rather, they are completely abandoned or even destroyed to create entirely new ones. Thus, transformative re-appropriation works as a signifying practice, but its relationship with the original signs and symbols and their connotations is very different from that of layered re-appropriation. Here, it is very much visible how the banner becomes a site of discursive struggle, with meaning being not only constructed but the ‘original’ meaning being contested.

Additionally, the juxtaposition of the crucified figure and the prayer creates a powerful layering of meaning. Semiotically, this dual re-appropriation demonstrates how verbal and visual elements can operate together as symbolic resources within protest iconography, each carrying cultural weight and mythic resonance, and each reshaping the other's meaning in the process. Both the image of Christ on the cross and the text of the prayer are profoundly ingrained within the shared conceptuals maps of Polish culture, making them ideal signs to be re-appropriated to express new meanings and provoke critical questions about how these symbols operate in the symbolic site of discursive struggle in Poland, their influence on the political sphere, and their connection to women's suffering. This image undoubtedly evokes strong emotional responses, but what is most significant for this analysis is the depth and complexity of emotions it carries. The banner presents a dark, pessimistic warning: the recently enacted ruling will inevitably lead to women dying.

Additionally, as the analysis reveals, the banner positions itself in clear opposition to Polish nationalism, particularly its gendered dimensions. It critiques the nationalist ideal of womanhood by exposing how this vision enforces women's suffering through the glorification of silent endurance and self-sacrifice. It exposes the mythical and limited dimension that womanhood has taken in Poland by revealing how nationalist ideology demands women's submission and self-denial in the service of the nation while disregarding their rights, autonomy, and well-being.

However, despite its incisive critique of Polish nationalism and the Catholic Church, the banner does not offer an alternative vision of womanhood or Polishness. Instead, it reflects the lived reality of the protesters, the gravity of the current situation, and the emotional landscape of the protests. It does not seek to reclaim or redefine Polish identity but rather exposes how Polish society treats its women and what it feels like to live as one.

The banner delivers a deeply moving message, rich with emotion, symbolism, and creativity, making it a vital part of the 'human rights memory' emerging from the protests. Importantly, while it does not construct a new narrative of Polishness or womanhood, it achieves a different, equally powerful feat: it portrays women's suffering caused by the Church through women's own gaze. The image conveys both profound sadness and remarkable courage. The bold re-appropriation of one of Catholicism's most central symbols, the crucified Christ, combined with a direct call for the clergy to confess their sins and seek forgiveness, is an

extraordinarily courageous act within the Polish cultural context. It breaks longstanding taboos and challenges deep-seated expectations, delivering a profound and fearless statement.

5.2.2. Honor and Glory to the Abortion Providers

Banner contains a sign: 'Honor and Glory to Abortion Providers' written in pastel colors and colorful hearts, flowers, and stars. This banner is interpreted as a creative re-appropriation of the patriotic slogan: "Honor and Glory to the Heroes."

While the slogan is a text composed of linguistic signs, and thus is of less relevance for the purpose of this study, its inclusion is justified as the slogan operates as a condensed signifier of national pride and sacrifice, rather than functioning as a literal statement. Therefore, the meaning connoted with the slogan allows for the text to function and be analyzed as a symbolic sign in itself.

Symbolic meaning

The slogan on the banners is a transformative, creative re-appropriation of a patriotic slogan, "Cześć i chwała bohaterom," which translates to "Honor and Glory to the Heroes". It has been a prominent phrase in Polish political and nationalist discourse for decades. This slogan is traditionally used to honor those who fought for Poland's freedom, independence, and national sovereignty, especially during wars, uprisings, and moments of national struggle. It

has been directed towards military heroes, independence fighters, and historical figures who are seen as defenders of the independence and sovereignty of the Polish nation.

In the banner, the re-appropriated slogan operates not as a literal statement but as a condensed signifier of national pride and sacrifice. Its meaning is rooted in ritualised repetition and its central place in nationalist rhetoric, allowing it to function in a manner closely parallel to national symbols. Like a flag or coat of arms, it can accrue a mythical dimension that naturalises political values and ideals. In its re-appropriated form, the slogan becomes a site of contestation, making it methodologically appropriate to analyse it through the same semiotic and iconological lenses applied to other national symbols.

<u>Interpretation</u>

The phrase *"Cześć i chwała aborterkom"* ("Honor and Glory to the Abortion Providers") radically redefines the idea of the "hero" in Polish national discourse. It subverts a familiar patriotic formula traditionally reserved for military or independence fighters, figures framed as male, sacrificial, and morally unassailable, and redirects it toward those fighting for women's agency, safety, and reproductive rights. In place of the battlefield, it locates heroism in acts of compassion, care, and resistance against unjust laws.

In this vision, feminist activists, abortion facilitators, and support networks become modern-day heroines and heroes. Their courage lies not in dying for the nation, but in enabling others to live with dignity and autonomy. Organizations such as Aborcja Bez Granic, Aborcyjny Dream Team, and Aboteka embody this reimagined heroism. Since the near-total abortion ban of 2020, they have provided logistical, emotional, financial, and medical support to women seeking abortion care in and beyond Poland. Their work often takes place under immense social stigma, legal ambiguity, surveillance, and threats. Yet, as grassroots initiatives like Dziewuchy Dziewuchom have shown, such activism is both a form of resistance and a collective act of care.

This feminist heroism is almost entirely absent from official memory culture. Polish national mythology has long cast the salvation of the nation as a male domain, relegating women to passive symbolic roles: mothers of martyrs, guardians of language, or keepers of tradition. As Agnieszka Graff notes, this gendered division erases women's historical agency and obscures

their roles in both past and present struggles.[98] By linking "honor" and "glory" to reproductive justice, the banner refuses this erasure and claims a place for women's contributions within the national narrative.

Helping someone access an abortion, in this reframed vision, becomes an act of civic bravery, solidarity, and moral clarity, defending the very values celebrated in traditional patriotic narratives: freedom, dignity, and self-determination. In doing so, the banner expands the moral and symbolic boundaries of both heroism and patriotism. Alongside the soldier and the insurgent, it places the caregiver, the organizer, and the activist who risks legal repercussions to uphold another's rights. The irony is sharp: in defending democratic ideals, these activists are often branded unpatriotic or even criminal, treated as enemies of the very freedoms they protect.

The work operates through a strategy of transformative creative re-appropriation. It takes a gendered slogan that glorifies male heroism and repurposes it to honor those historically excluded from the heroic pantheon. In doing so, it adds a new "entry" to the Polish cultural dictionary of heroism, an image of activists who, often at personal risk, ensure that others can access abortion and essential healthcare. This is not only a feminist intervention in language and symbolism, but also a statement about how history is written and remembered: as a struggle for democracy, dignity, solidarity, and equality.

The visual design of the banner reinforces its challenge to patriotic convention. Instead of grave tones and martial imagery, it uses pastel pinks and violets, with stars, flowers, and hearts scattered in the background. This playful, almost childlike aesthetic stands in stark contrast to the solemnity of the original slogan, producing a defamiliarizing effect. By visually and verbally undermining the expected seriousness, it exposes the gendered exclusions embedded in national memory.

This humor and irony do not ridicule past national heroes or trivialize their sacrifices. Rather, they dismantle the assumption, rooted in a romanticized, martyrological tradition, that Polish heroism is morally pure, male-coded, and immune to critique. In this tradition, everyday life and personal choices are deemed irrelevant beside the "great sacrifice" for national independence, and it is considered disrespectful to question the moral conduct of those elevated to heroic status. The banner inverts this logic, grounding heroism in everyday,

[98] A. Graff, *Świat bez Kobiet: Płeć w Polskim Życiu Publicznym*, 2nd edn., Warszawa, Marginesy, 2021, pp. 35–37.

tangible acts of care and solidarity, particularly those that challenge injustice in contemporary society.

By celebrating abortion providers as heroes, the banner makes a bold claim: to be Polish is not only to remember the nation's martyrs, but also to act, practically, compassionately, and politically, in defense of others' dignity and rights. This reframing broadens Polishness beyond militarism and martyrdom, opening it to a feminist ethic of care, justice, and civic responsibility.

Finally, in a political moment marked by democratic backsliding, the banner situates these women not only as defenders of reproductive rights but as guardians of democracy itself. Their courage, solidarity, and refusal to remain silent echo the virtues traditionally celebrated in Polish resistance movements, but reframed through a feminist lens. In this way, the work does more than reinterpret a slogan; it redefines the very boundaries of national memory.

5.3. Findings

In this sub-chapter findings of the analysis will be presented and discussed. Additionally, this chapter returns to the research questions and outlines what the analysis of five banners has brought to light about how protest imagery challenges dominant narratives, generates alternative representations of Polishness and womanhood, and positions Polish feminism vis-à-vis Polish nationalism.

Across the material, a consistent process of re-signification is visible. Creative re-appropriation lifts well-known national symbols from the mythic register that presents them as natural and timeless, and relocates them in contemporary struggles and everyday realities. In doing so, the symbols are, so to speak, modernised, not necessarily by their form but by pairing them with new associations that speak to present harms, hopes, and claims.

During analysis, a pattern and two distinctive categories of creative re-appropriation have been identified. Banners were described as either layered or transformative creative re-appropriation, based on the approach to the original symbols. This served as a structure and comparison element for the analysis. In layered re-appropriation, the original sign remains intact while a new element is added, producing symbolic tension that is embraced

and used. In transformative re-appropriation, the earlier code is kept only to be inverted and dismantled. At the core of both is defamiliarisation, operating visually through insertions, substitutions, added symbols, and changed aesthetics, and thematically through irony, parody, inversion, and shifts of moral focus.

A central dynamic across both pathways is symbolic tension, the co-presence of established meaning and altered meaning on the same surface. In layered works, this tension is embraced and even cherished. The flag with the thunderbolt does not cancel patriotic affect; it insists on co-ownership, signalling closeness to the emblem and a standing claim to contribute to what Polishness means. The reimagined Black Madonna operates similarly. The balaclava, ordinarily a sign of threat, becomes a sign of communal protection and civil courage, while the halo ringed with eight stars carries street anger into sanctified space. The message is not desecration but reclamation. The weeping Madonna extends this reclamation by redirecting Christian compassion toward the suffering of daughters and toward democratic erosion. Here, the tension is tender rather than confrontational: the saint remains intact, but her gaze is reoriented; Marian sorrow and moral authority are reclaimed for protesters, showing her as being on their side.

Transformative works intensify tension into fracture to expose the limits of the dominant code. The crucified pregnant woman reverses the grammar of redemption: the cross, ordinarily a talisman of protection, appears as an instrument of harm, while the inverted Confiteor withdraws ritual guilt from women and places responsibility on institutions that dignify suffering while producing it. The pastel banner, 'Honor and Glory to the Abortion Providers', moves differently: it dismantles a solemn patriotic formula to then build a new one. The national heroism remains, but the heroine is redefined; out of the 'debris' of martial heroism emerges a civic heroism of care, solidarity, activism, and aid. In both cases, the familiar frame is not merely questioned, it is dismantled and built anew.

These distinct acts of creative re-appropriation amount to a two-front challenge to Polish ethno-nationalism. Reclamation undermines exclusivity by speaking through the flag and Mary, denying nationalist gatekeepers a privileged right to define Polishness or Christianity. Transformation exposes how sacred and patriotic codes have been used to sanctify domination: the cross as harm, confession as misdirected guilt, heroism as silencing, and lack of historical recognition. Whether approached through layered or transformative re-appropriation, the images confront stereotypes, expectations, and assumptions embedded

in nationalist discourse: that patriotism is martial and male; that womanhood is sacrificial and silent; that Catholic symbols only align with obedience; that feminist dissent is foreign to Polish tradition. Each banner answers these assumptions with a specific counter-move. The flag insists that feminist demands belong inside the nation. The Black Madonna insists that resistance belongs inside Christian iconography. The weeping Madonna insists that compassion belongs with women and with a threatened democracy. The crucifixion scene insists that theology cannot be used to justify the denial of agency and imposed suffering. The re-appropriated patriotic slogan insists that solidarity, activism, and civil courage define national heroism.

In practice, creative re-appropriation works by taking widely recognisable symbols that have come to feel timeless because myth presents them as natural and beyond dispute, and placing them back in the here-and-now of people's lives. Set against contemporary struggles and realities in Poland, their supposed timelessness is revealed as an ideological effect rather than a fact. In that sense, the symbols are modernised: not because their forms are rewritten, but because they are relocated to current conflicts and coupled with new associations that speak to present harms and hopes. Following Hall, meanings hold only as long as communities share conceptual maps and codes; when contexts shift and different users mobilise the same sign, connotations can be extended, redirected, or challenged. The banners make this visible: national icons, like all signs, are not fixed things but 'social agreements' that can be re-specified.

Finally, even where institutional change is blocked, the cultural effects persist. The banners leave behind a repertoire of words and images that migrate into everyday life, making visible a Poland in which inclusion, care, and democratic responsibility are patriotic. Symbols once presented as timeless and singular now carry plural readings; women appear in the national imaginary as authors rather than emblems. What these banners say about being Polish is that belonging is not a closed inheritance but a shared work: contested, argued over, re-imagined, and, in these protests, remade through signs that are at once familiar and new.

Taken together, the findings answer the research questions clearly. First, the banners subvert dominant narratives by creatively re-appropriating familiar national and cultural symbols and, in the same gesture, produce alternatives. The flag with the thunderbolt layers feminist urgency onto the national colour field, breaking the sense that patriotism belongs to one camp. The Black Madonna in a balaclava and the weeping Madonna redirect Christian

compassion toward daughters and toward democracy, reclaiming Marian sorrow and authority for the protesters. The crucified pregnant woman and the rekeyed patriotic slogan deconstruct inherited codes, exposing how they have sanctified domination, and then either indict them or rebuild a new patriotic language centered on care, autonomy, and mutual aid.

Second, the banners show how protest imagery functions as a site of feminist resistance that redefines Polishness and womanhood while positioning Polish feminism vis-à-vis Polish nationalism. Polishness is presented as a civic practice grounded in solidarity, empathy, and democratic responsibility rather than as a sacralised essence. Womanhood is reframed from sacrificial silence to political authorship, with space for anger, grief, tenderness, irony, and strength. The relationship to nationalism that surfaces is complex: layered works reclaim shared icons from within, while transformative works confront and dismantle exclusionary codes from without. Across the set, symbols associated with *Strajk Kobiet* are elevated into patriotic signs, placing the movement inside the national conversation rather than at its edges.

On a final note, it is important to highlight that these findings derive from five banners documented in the Archive of Public Protests. They illuminate mechanisms of meaning-making in a specific conjuncture and do not claim movement-wide representativeness. Nor do they offer a definitive resolution to the question of feminism's relationship to Polish nationalism; rather, they contribute analytically grounded insight into how that relationship is contested, negotiated, and reimagined in visual practice.

6. Conclusion

This thesis examined how, in contemporary Poland, shaped by democratic backsliding and a renewed state–Church alliance, banners from the *Strajk Kobiet* protests responded to dominant cultural narratives. These banners challenged a symbolic order that treated national and religious symbols as fixed and sacred, re-appropriating them in response to attacks on women's reproductive rights and exclusion from the category of 'Polishness'. They articulated criticism and opposition while proposing alternative visions of 'Polishness' and womanhood, positioning Polish feminism in a complex relation to nationalism.

Banners were read as a visual political language and as both traces and sites of cultural rupture. Five photographs from the Archive of Public Protests, selected for their engagement with national symbols, were analysed through Barthes's denotation, connotation, combined

with Panofsky's iconology. Two modes emerged: layered re-appropriation, which retains the sign while adding new meaning, and transformative re-appropriation, which inverts or dismantles it. Examples ranged from the flag with the thunderbolt and Marian images reclaimed for feminist purposes, to the crucified pregnant woman and reworked patriotic slogans exposing or rebuilding national codes. Defamiliarisation and symbolic tension were central mechanisms in the signification and re-signification processes.

The findings show that these banners both contest and redefine national symbols, framing patriotism around care, autonomy, and solidarity. 'Polishness' appears as a civic practice rather than a sacral essence, and womanhood as political authorship rather than sacrificial silence. The results align with Ramme's "feminist patriotism," support Graff's claim of cultural rupture, and complement Majewska's emphasis on solidarity by showing how care and civic responsibility can be made patriotic.

For scholarship, the findings show how cultural change can lay the groundwork for later institutional shifts. Future research could expand the material selection to include cases that reject national symbols, incorporate the perspectives of banner authors, and trace how creative re-appropriation circulates and influences media, cultural spaces, and political discourse. Comparative studies in other national or regional contexts, especially in countries where religion and nationalism are closely intertwined, could test the arguments further and reveal cross-cultural similarities or differences in symbolic struggle. Applying a similar research design abroad, or in transnational protest movements, could also help internationalise the investigation, providing insight into how visual political language operates across borders and how symbolic strategies travel, adapt, or transform in different cultural and political environments.

In closing, the banners expanded who can speak as Polish and what can count as patriotic. By reimagining familiar symbols, they authored new meanings in a language the culture already understood. Law may stall; images travel, leaving a durable repertoire in which inclusion, care, and autonomy can be spoken not against the nation but as the nation.

7. Bibiolography

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