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# Counter-revolutionary art: OBEY and the manufacturing of dissent

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I critically analyze the work of Shepard Fairey, the street artist better known as OBEY, as a multimodal discourse. After introducing the notion of street art, I analyze Fairey's aesthetics, inspired in Pop Art and Soviet Constructivism, as well as his accounts on his own art, in order to unveil his ideology. I then discuss a particular case, concerning the pastiche of the Che Guevara's image. I will show that the seemingly subversive nature of OBEY's work, is nothing more than marketing. Consequently, by industrially (re)producing and commodifying dissent, OBEY banalizes and deactivates it. According to the dichotomy between oppositional and emergent discourses, I conclude that OBEY enacts only an oppositional behavior. Moreover, by 'manufacturing propaganda dissent', OBEY performs protest, but in doing so he contributes to perpetuating the system he says he fights against.

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## Introduction

The neoliberal ideology seems to be firmly installed in actual contemporary society, driving many aspects of life (Bourdieu, 1998; Chomsky, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Sánchez-Bermúdez, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless criticism and opposition to the neoliberal system<sup>2</sup> are present in many forms, with activists trying in many ways to counter it by proposing alternative models of political organization and social life. One of these ways is through artistic discourse. Nonetheless there is a constant risk for this discourse to be commodified, hence deprived of its emancipatory potential. Many studies have been conducted on the tensions between authenticity and mainstream and on how anti-establishment artistic expression is commodified: from Barthes' classic work concerning the Hippies clothes in the '60s (1969) to Gilroy's more recent study on Hip-hop (2000).

In this paper I will analyze the art of Frank Shepard Fairey, as known as OBEY. Starting from the underground street-art scene and thanks to a good self-promotion, OBEY has become a brand with a global market. Thanks to the way Fairey has positioned it, this brand conveys a rebellious aura (think – as we will see below – to the keywords used by Fairey such as *dissent*, *revolution*, his references to guerrilla, Molotov cocktails, etc.).

The paper will explore how Fairey presents himself, how he constructs subversiveness, and will discuss the emancipatory potential of his artistic discourse.

## Art as discourse

A key idea of this study is that art is a discourse. Taking a Foucauldian perspective, I consider discourse as a complex uninterrupted and flowing set of beliefs, ideas and practices that represent and construct the speaker as well as the spoken. Discourse of course has social effects and plays a role in the enactment of power and legitimization; furthermore, discourse is made of other discourses (1969, 1971). From this point of view I will analyze Fairey's artworks, as well as his accounts on his own art. This intrinsic multiplicity of discourse is linked to the concept of polyphony (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Barthes, 1977, p. 159; Blommaert, 2005, p. 253; Fairclough, 1992, p. 117; Voloshinov, [1929] 1973) and will result crucial in understanding street art as post-modern (Irvine, 2012). In particular, under this perspective, I will frame the analysis of Fairey's pastiche of Che Guevara's image (see below) as an *entextualization* (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, pp. 72–75; Blommaert, 2005, pp. 47–48), that is, the usage of forms and meanings for ends completely different from those for which they were conceived, a form of extracting a discourse from its original context and ideological assumptions for reinserting it in a new (con)text, with new and originally unimagined aims. The Foucauldian approach also helps explaining the issue of *performativity* that I will treat in the final chapter.

## Critical analysis of multimodal discourse

The multiplicity mentioned above also has to do with the different *modes* employed for making meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, [1996] 2006, 2001; Royce & Bowcher, 2007). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), 'Mode is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning [...]; different modes offer different potentials for making meaning' (p. 79). Being constituted of visual artworks and verbal utterances, Fairey's discourse is obviously multimodal. For this reason, this paper inserts itself in the strand of *critical analysis of multimodal discourse* (Machin, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2012): I will conduct a qualitative interpretivistic analysis of the textual and visual (aesthetic, iconographic and iconological) elements of Fairey's discourse to unveil the hidden ideology. If ideologies (van Dijk, 1998; Larraín, 1979) are at stake, it goes without saying that the relation between discourse and society (its structure and dynamics) will be addressed in the paper, particularly from a critical perspective. I intend *critical* as a position that 'does not reduce the "reality" to what actually exists, but that conceives it on as a field of possibilities' with the aim of changing society for better (De Sousa Santos, 2005, p. 97, my translation).

Two concepts will reveal crucial for carrying the multimodal analysis: *choice* and *inter-semiotic complementarity*. As for the former, Kress and van Leeuwen state that when authors chose one semiotic feature instead of another available (within visual, linguistic, musical domain, etc.), these choices define style:

Design rests on the possibility of choice - this could have been chosen rather than that. That permits the description of style as the effect of a series of choices made in the design of a

message. Choice is always circumscribed by power in different ways, financial, social, cultural power, and so style is the politics of choice. Styles are subject to social evaluations and these lead to a social ranking expressed as aesthetic judgments. Hence socially, aesthetics can be seen as the politics of style. (2001, p. 28)

The concept of inter-semiotic complementarity (Royce, 2007), instead, has to do with the semiotic division and specialization of labor, and with the interplay between different semiotic modes, as, for instance, text and image. We will see this concept applied in the analysis of Fairey's pastiche of Che Guevara's image.

For the analysis of Fairey's aesthetics, I will focus on the main iconographical and iconological elements (Panofsky, [1939] 1955, see below) and on the rules of the grammar of visual design, concerning frames, forms, shapes, vectors and colors (Kress & van Leeuwen, [1996] 2006, 2001, 2002), according to the idea that all the visual and linguistic elements fall into the artist's choice and that this choice will shape their style. The logical consequence is that analysts can infer meanings from the artist's choices.

### A sociological approach to the study of art as discourse in society

Analyzing art as discourse puts this paper in conversation with the sociology of art. Without addressing the many questions dealt with in this discipline, I will refer to some of the most recent reflections, as to how the artistic field has evolved in the contemporary society, particularly in relation to the post-modern paradigm (Zolberg, 2013). This last point, as we will see, will be evident in the analysis of the pastiche.

Studying the artwork from a sociological perspective means to overcome the dichotomous position of social scientists that desacralize artwork by unveiling the hidden ideologies and see the art object as a by-product of social conditions and that of aestheticians who consider the social structure only residually (Tanner, 2003; Zolberg, 1990). Following what pleaded by Zolberg (1990, pp. 53–54) this paper tries to overcome this *impasse* and analyze the art object as a semiotic artifact individually created, but which is socially determined and that at the same time *mediates* – in Williams' terms (1977, pp. 95–100) – ideologies and in its turn determines society and its structures. I have tried here to merge aesthetic and sociological (critical) analysis, also within the frame of the long-existing question of the relationship between (individual) agency and (social) structure.

In the present paper two concepts will be employed in the analysis of art as discourse in society: firstly, the contribution made by Panofsky ([1939] 1955) on iconography (the symbolic meanings associated to certain images) and iconology (why the author produced the artwork the way they did); secondly, that made by Bourdieu (1980) on the concept of *homology* between artwork and society.

Following Zolberg (1990; see also Inglis, 2005), Fairey's work needs to be understood as a social process, on the backdrop of the socio-economic and political situation. Clearly in line with the program of the Frankfurt critical theory in the domain of art analysis, my examination of Fairey's art is a critique of the social structure through a critical analysis of the art produced within it. Instead, opposite to the Frankfurt school, I analyze a marginal form of art as street art (even though marginality of street art can be disputed). The approach adopted in this paper is sociological –

even though my position is ideographic rather than nomothetic – in that I consider art as conditioned by or related to market concerns and to political concerns, and in that I take a materialistic approach (Zolberg, 1990). In particular, as for this last point, it is worthy to note that, as Inglis puts it, despite the widespread opinions influenced by Romanticism of art as authentic and anti-establishment, ‘art and money have always been intertwined’ (2005, p. 25), and that since the last 150 years, art has become a business aimed at profit.

## Definitions of street art

Street art embraces visual means such as posters, wall paintings, graffiti, murals, billboards, stickers, stencils, banners and so on regardless of the technique, technology or support (collage, digital editing, print, spray, brush, oil, paper, wood, stone, etc.) may be: every technique, means and support is appropriate for creating street art, and *every place* is suitable for showing it. According to Lewisohn (2008; see also Irvine, 2012) street art is a sub-genre of graffiti writing, with which is related, but from which it is equally distinguished, in that graffiti is based on tag and mainly on typography, while street art is not: street art is ‘all the art in the street that is not graffiti’ (John Fekner *apud* Lewisohn, 2008, p. 23).

Riggle (2010) also distinguishes street art from graffiti as well as from other forms of public art; he defines street art as an art deployed in urban (mainly public) spaces not protected and/or sanctioned by art-world and/or institutions; it deliberately uses urban spaces as material and contextual resource; moreover, its meaning depends on the use of the street and this is actually jeopardized when separated from the street (pp. 245–246; see also Irvine, 2012). Riggle goes on stating that street art is generally cheap to make and intentionally anonymous or pseudonymous; it is publicly available, that is, owned by no one or by anyone; it is experienced freely, in an unsolicited and haphazard way; it is mainly ephemeral, more or less far away from the (institutionalized) art-world, and (supposedly) separated from market logics.

Many authors emphasize from one side the *politicalness* of street art (Hundertmark, 2003; Lewisohn, 2008) and from the other the complex links with advertising (Borghini, Visconti, Anderson, & Sherry, 2010; Drone, 2010; Irvine, 2012; Levinson, 1984; Lewisohn, 2008, p. 112; McGaw, 2008) in terms of culture jamming, claims for visibility, technique for self-advertisement and comment on advertising. If literature shows the existence of tensions between subversive and commercial nature of street art, nevertheless no agreement seems to exist on its political nature: while some draw a distinction between street art and political street art (Philips, 2015), others, as Chafee (1993), highlight its intrinsic politicalness. According to Chafee, street art is a form of politicized, bottom-up and grass roots mass communication, that ‘gives expression to groups that otherwise could not comment upon or support current or perceived social problems’ (1993, p. 3). For Chafee, street art is a way for building and spreading political messages, forming social consciousness, expressing dissent and trying to change the status quo either in authoritarian or in more open systems (1993, p. 4). Nonetheless this issue of the political nature of street art raises the question on the emancipatory potential of an art considered as democratic, horizontal and bottom-up.

In the next sections I am going to discuss this point dealing more in detail with Fairey’s case.

## Fairey from underground scene to world-fame

As for many other street artists, such as Jean Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring or more recently Banksy (Lewisohn, 2008, p. 94; see also Irvine, 2012), Fairey also started as an underground artist, before achieving fame.

Fairey, whose nickname OBEY, according to his own words, was inspired by the 1988 John Carpenter sci-fi film *They live*, became a celebrity thanks to his stylized image of the popular wrestler André the Giant, nickname of André Roussimoff,<sup>3</sup> mainly active from 1973 to 1987. Through a viral campaign, organized and led by Fairey himself since 1989, and through word of mouth, mails and blogs, the image quickly spread. This shows that following Pop artists' lesson, street artists have learned how to successfully advertise themselves. Below one can see Fairey's sticker featuring a black and white image of André the Giant (Figure 1).

As the author says (Banet-Weiser & Fairey, 2009), all started as a haphazard accident, while working for a t-shirt shop called The Water Shed: while showing a friend of his how to make a stencil, he came across a picture of Russimoff on a newspaper; he used it for a stencil and suggested to use the name 'Andre's Posse' instead of 'The Water Shed Team' for his group of friends; he then used the wrestler's image for stickers to be stuck on the landscape of his hometown Providence (Rhode Island, USA). These stickers seemed mysterious and were inquired about by the local newspapers, thus becoming bespoken. So the beginning was due to a fortuitous accident, and a marketing campaign based on silence conspiracy which stimulated curiosity and a viral campaign, with the (unintended?) complicity of local media. That image of André the Giant was then restyled in a sharpened and flat black and white image (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Fairey's first sticker of André the Giant. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/25814320@N02/7381493698>.





**Figure 2.** Fairey's stencil of André the Giant. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/evarinaldiphotography/6823050093/>.

This stencil gave Fairey world-wide, underground fame. Then, in 2008, came the endorsement of Obama's campaign (Sturken, 2009). Fairey is actually the author of the Hope poster for the 2008 primary Democratic campaign (Figure 3). Obviously a world-wide famous 'icon' as Barack Obama gave Fairey world-wide mainstream fame too (Beer, 2008).

In the following lines, one can see how Fairey presents himself (Fisher et al., 2012, p. 245).<sup>4</sup> This excerpt will usefully show which meanings Fairey attaches to his art:

Shepard Fairey is a graphic artist. He received his formal training at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he took several courses in photography and screen printing. After graduating, he worked as a screen printer, designer, and illustrator. He divided his time between graphic design projects commissioned by clients and his own art, deriving most of his income from the former. For several years, he struggled financially. In recent years, however, he has been able to support himself through his work as an artist. Today, he is a part owner of three businesses that have grown out of his work: Obey Giant Art, Inc., which distributes Fairey's graphic art; Obey Giant LLC, which licenses Fairey's art for use on apparel and merchandise; and Studio Number One, a commercial graphic design firm. Together, these companies have approximately fifteen employees. Much of Fairey's art has been characterized by two related traits. First, it has a distinctive aesthetic, which Fairey has described as a 'bold iconic style that is based on stylizing and idealizing images'. Second, since approximately 1990, much of Fairey's art has been overtly political in character. Many of his images criticize, typically through caricature, prominent politicians; others explore the power of propaganda; others celebrate musicians or counterculture figures; others advance causes, such as environmentalism or privacy protection.

In this text, we can see a narrative that presents the realization of the American Dream, where a subject passes through financial struggle to owning a company – a symbol of success. Fairey also defines his own art as 'overtly political' and critical. Fairey's narrative



**Figure 3.** Shepard Fairey's HOPE poster for Obama's 2008 campaign. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dreamsjung/2294733100/>.

on his way to fame perfectly embodies the American Dream, and actually, as he states, he *believes* in Capitalism:

One of the most jarring realizations this project has brought about for me is the complete inevitability of supply and demand economics in a capitalist society. I will explain, but I must also emphasize that I believe in capitalism with some checks to chill out the evil greedy element. Capitalism is a way for hard work to yield rewards. (Heller, 2004, p. 3)

Reducing Capitalism to a meritocratic system is obviously disputable. The excerpt shows some of the contradictions of Fairey's discourse. How could he think that he would 'change the world for the better' (as he himself states in his website<sup>5</sup>) if he believes in Capitalism? Are 'some checks to chill out the evil greedy element' enough? This last point is especially important if we consider that the recurrent global crisis, inequities, exploitation, unsustainable development, poverty, marginalization and so on are nothing but business as usual for Capitalism.<sup>6</sup> This will be the core of my critical discussion of Fairey's art: the manufacturing and selling visual activism without a political emancipatory *praxis*. From this perspective, another source for understanding Fairey's ideology is his own webpage.<sup>7</sup> The first thing that stands out is his slogan 'manufacturing quality dissent since 1989'. Slogans like this, which highlight the production and the business birthdates ('since XXX'), are very common also for many other commercial brands. This slogan clearly states that OBEY is a commercial brand. Here, taken from his webpage, is what Fairey calls his manifesto.<sup>8</sup>

**Manifesto.** The OBEY sticker campaign can be explained as an experiment in Phenomenology. Heidegger describes Phenomenology as 'the process of letting things manifest themselves'. Phenomenology attempts to enable people to see clearly something that is right



before their eyes but obscured; things that are so taken for granted that they are muted by abstract observation. The FIRST AIM OF PHENOMENOLOGY is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. The OBEY sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings. Because people are not used to seeing advertisements or propaganda for which the product or motive is not obvious, frequent and novel encounters with the sticker provoke thought and possible frustration, nevertheless revitalizing the viewer's perception and attention to detail. The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker. Because OBEY [link to: <http://obey.com.uk>] has no actual meaning, the various reactions and interpretations of those who view it reflect their personality and the nature of their sensibilities. Many people who are familiar with the sticker find the image itself amusing, recognizing it as non-sensical, and are able to derive straightforward visual pleasure without burdening themselves with an explanation. The PARANOID OR CONSERVATIVE VIEWER however may be confused by the sticker's persistent presence and condemn it as an underground cult with subversive intentions. Many stickers have been peeled down by people who were annoyed by them, considering them an eye sore and an act of petty vandalism, which is ironic considering the number of commercial graphic images everyone in American society is assaulted with daily. Another phenomenon the sticker has brought to light is the trendy and CONSPICUOUSLY CONSUMPTIVE nature of many members of society. For those who have been surrounded by the sticker, its familiarity and cultural resonance is comforting and owning a sticker provides a souvenir or keepsake, a memento. People have often demanded the sticker merely because they have seen it everywhere and possessing a sticker provides a sense of belonging. The Giant sticker seems mostly to be embraced by those who are (or at least want to seem to be) rebellious. Even though these people may not know the meaning of the sticker, they enjoy its slightly disruptive underground quality and wish to contribute to the furthering of its humorous and absurd presence which seems to somehow be antiestablishment/societal convention. Giant stickers are both embraced and rejected, the reason behind which, upon examination reflects the psyche of the viewer. Whether the reaction be positive or negative, the stickers existence is worthy as long as it causes people to consider the details and meanings of their surroundings. In the name of fun and observation Fairey, 1990.

Fairey repeatedly stresses that the OBEY sticker has no meaning and is nonsensical, and that it is simply meant to cause some reaction to people viewing it; he also highlights the curiosity that can stimulate in viewers 'seeing advertisements or propaganda for which the product or motive is not obvious'. Actually OBEY sticker was a way to stimulate curiosity toward the sticker's own aesthetics and its brand (OBEY): in the end was a marketing campaign for the OBEY brand. He repeatedly highlights the fact that the sticker can seem rebellious or anti-establishment and that can be 'embraced by those who are (or at least want to seem to be) rebellious'. Paradoxically, he points out the consumptive nature of actual society, and the bourgeois tendency of possessing (for instance possessing art), without considering that his own behavior is reproducing and stimulating it. Moreover, he states that American society is assaulted daily with a huge number of commercial graphic images, but he fails to notice that his own behavior is contributing to this assault, since his sticker too has commercial intentions. The highlighting of the (supposedly) subversive value of the sticker seems in contrast with the fact that it has been created just for fun.

I will come back more extensively to these issues later, but in order to carry on a deeper ideological analysis of Fairey's art (*as* multimodal discourse), I am going to analyze his aesthetics.

## Some reflections on OBEY aesthetics

There are a number of art styles upon which Fairey draws. In particular, Fairey's aesthetics can be easily related to Pop Art and Soviet Constructivism (Banet-Weiser & Sturken, 2010; Droney, 2010; Irvine, 2012). Such choices of course come loaded with certain associations. For this reason in the next sections, I will deal firstly with Pop Art, and then with Soviet Constructivism.

As for Pop Art, Fairey himself said (Banet-Weiser & Fairey, 2009, p. 9) that he was inspired by Barbara Kruger's work.<sup>9</sup>

Irvine has linked Street art to Pop Art (Irvine, 2012; see also James, 1996, p. 24) in particular as for features more generally belonging to post-modernism (and already *in nuce* present in Dadaism) as *détournement*, remix, hybridity, appropriation and inversion of high and low art. Irvine also highlights the dialogic character of street art, with artwork more or less openly conversing with other products or artworks (2012; see also Droney, 2010). Discussing Pop artist Barbara Kruger's influence on Street artists such as Fairey, Irvine highlights features as the ads visual style, and the retake of mass media imagery replicated on walls with a bi-dimensional style. This relationship between art and advertising, both in terms of culture jamming and of usage of advertisement's techniques and topics, is highlighted by many other scholars too (see below).

## Pop Art

Pop Art, or the 'Mass-Culture Art' (Shanes, 2004, p. 7), is an art developed after the expansion of American economy in the '50s and '60s, based on product awareness, and mainly concerned with 'the effects and artifacts of mass-culture' (Shanes, 2004). Actually many scholars (Harrison, [2001] 2003; James, 1996; Mamiya, 1992; Sandberg, 1967; Shanes, 2004) have highlighted that Pop artists represented products of everyday mass consumption, were they objects (sodas, hamburgers, well-known brands, etc.) or people (cinema, TV, radio or comics' heroes, celebrities, etc.), employing technologies of mechanical reproduction as photography, silkscreen, stencil, and style inspired in print newspapers, advertisement, posters, magazines, as halftones and so on.<sup>10</sup> In visual terms, flatness, flat background and highly saturated colors are some of the major features of Pop Art aesthetics (Shanes, 2004, p. 26).

According to James, Pop artists brought down art studios from the clouds and blended their art with the life of the streets (1996, p. 20), elevating 'vulgar materials to the status of "high-brow" culture' (p. 5) or blurring the distinction between high and low cultural realms (see also Harrison, [2001] 2003).

Also according to Sandberg, Pop Art employs well-known images of consumerist culture, magnifying them, but the provocative and detached forms of representing the American consumerist society let open the question whether the author is parodying or celebrating their sources (1967, p. 231). And even if Sandberg, agreeing with Elmaleh (2003), concludes that 'Pop Art, perhaps without being entirely aware of it, is sharply critical of contemporary American society' (1967, p. 233), other scholars disagree. According to James, for instance, Pop artists became eventually the establishment against which they formerly rebelled (1996, p. 23). This is due to the ideological vacuity of Pop Art and its low emancipatory charge that can be related to the lack of a revolutionary *praxis*. From

this perspective, one of the major criticisms against Pop Art came from Mamiya (1992), who also pointed out the relationships of many of the main Pop artists as Johns, Rosenquist, Rauschenberg, Warhol and Wesselmann with the advertisement industry.<sup>11</sup> Pop artists not only pillaged advertisement imagery, subjects and techniques, they also appropriated the mechanics of advertisement and branding; according to Mamiya, Pop Art lost any potential of social change by commodifying itself. In the conclusions to her book, also Harrison ([2001] 2003, pp. 209–222) gives account of the many criticisms already levelled against Pop Art for its reactionary and conservative character, as those of Kozloff ([1973] 1997), Kuspit (1976) and Mamiya (1992).

## Soviet Constructivism

Something completely different occurs with Constructivism, an artistic movement fully engaged with Marxism, embedded in Soviet Revolution and aiming at the achieving of Communism (Fer, 1989, 1993, pp. 91–92; Lodder, 2012). Indeed, according to Scharf, no other movement had been so linked to Marxism and revolutionary Communism ([1966] 1994, p. 160). Stepanova ([1921] 2007) states that Constructivism is not only an artistic movement, but an ideology and the product of revolutionary search for a new consciousness in art; it is materialistic, non-idealistic, industrialist, and technologist in its forms and principles; and it considers the artist as producer. The term Constructivism refers to the social role of artist as constructor and engineer and the underpinning metaphor of construction was a widespread and recurring keyword referring to the process of building a new (Communist) society (Fer, 1989, p. 21, 1993, p. 105).

Constructivism opposed and negated realism preferring overall simple Euclidean geometrical forms, straight ruler-drawn lines and a limited palette of pure colors (Fer, 1989, 1993; Margolin, 1984; Scharf, [1966] 1994; Lodder, 2012).

According to Lodder, designing advertising posters was one of the main domains of Constructivist artists (2012, p. 231). They chose this support also for revolutionary propaganda, since it was an easy and cheap means for massively propagating revolutionary messages among mainly illiterate people, which was one of the chief aims of Constructivism (Scharf, [1966] 1994).

Geometric forms and straight ruler-drawn lines were deemed as representing technology, and the technologization that allows to link art and industrial work, as well as to overcome individualistic, personal composition or superfluous ornament in favor of impersonal collectivized and functional construction.

Of the major Constructivists, Rodchenko needs to be retained for the aims of this paper, since he mainly worked designing magazines and posters, also for advertisements. And he seems to be Fairey's principal inspiration.<sup>12</sup>

As Margolin (1984) states, the major visual features of Constructivist posters were the usage of a limited palette – mainly grey, black, red, white – of highly symbolic colors, especially the black and red that symbolize the revolution (Lodder, 2012, p. 239; Soboleva, 2008); simplified depictions; straight lines and simple geometrical shapes such as (segments of) circle, rectangle and triangle, drawn with square set and compass; sharp separation of figure and ground; angular and frontal views; diagonal and symmetric composition; real images rather than abstract symbols; a clear typography often oversized; among the techniques there were the stencil, photomontage and collage. These visual features were

meant to represent the urban and industrial environment; and the techniques (technologically advanced and allowing mechanical reproduction) were in line with the movement's commitment with industrial production and technology. Thus, the visual choices, the technical procedures and the aesthetics features were aligned with (and mediated) the movement's ideology, its revolutionary consciousness and project.

### The style of a counter-revolutionary artist

As can be seen, there are many similarities between Fairey's art and Pop Art and Soviet Constructivism. Fairey's color palette of flat and pure colors (red, black and white), is similar to Kruger's one, as well as to that of Soviet Constructivism. The techniques of stencil and photomontage, common to Pop Art and Constructivism, are widely employed by Fairey. Fairey's visual features as geometrical shapes, straight lines and perspectives are clearly inspired in Constructivism. Other visual features as the flat background, the figures highlighted by outlines, the presence of short bold texts in a clear and oversized typography are common to both Pop Art and Constructivism. The *détournement* and the depiction of subjects belonging to the mass culture are typical of Pop Art and are common in Fairey's art: is not Fairey's pastiche of Che Guevara's image parallel to those of Marilyn Monroe, Liz Taylor, Mao and Lenin crafted by Warhol? Fairey branded and commodified himself and his art as Pop artists did. If Rodchenko is the major inspiration for Fairey is because the former worked with visual design and produced posters. Constructivism was overtly propagandistic, and Fairey tries to emulate its AgitProp style.<sup>13</sup>

As we have seen above, Pop Art constructed a new relationship between art and commerce and engaged in a complex relationship with advertising and mass production. It meant the popularization of the art in two senses: (a) by massive reproduction and commercialization of technically reproducible artworks (Benjamin, 1936) and (b) by the *artifiction* (transformation in artwork) of everyday mass products (Shanes, 2004), were they objects (Brillo, Campbell) or personae (Liz Taylor, Marilyn Monroe). From this perspective, is not haphazard for Fairey to choose André the Giant as subject, since wrestlers are among the most popular personae of the contemporary popular American culture. And he was probably the most famous wrestler during the time of Fairey's adolescence. For someone like him, born in 1970, in the '80s André the Giant, then at the top of his career, was a veritable *popular* (in the double sense) hero. So even if the event of the stickers is casual, as Fairey stated, his choice is not just a coincidence.

As for Soviet Constructivism, we should bear in mind from one side its appeal, as shown by the existence of internet groups that share and exchange real or replicas of Soviet posters, and its influence on advertising or graphic design.

But it seems that there is much more in Fairey's choice. As we have seen above, Constructivism was engaged in Bolshevik revolution. Even though one can find propaganda in Fascist, Communist or Capitalistic regimes, Fairey chose to employ Constructivism aesthetics. Soviet Constructivism is by far the form of political communication most commonly considered as propaganda. As for what happens with *our* patriotism and *their* nationalism (Billig, 1995), it is always *their* communication that is biased and never *ours*. Ours is (truthful) political communication while theirs is (untruthful) propaganda. Under this perspective, Communist communication is propaganda, while

Capitalist one is just political communication. If I highlight this issue of Soviet Constructivism it is because Fairey's choice is highly significant. And it is so, because Fairey here incurs two contradictions: (1) he states that he wants to call attention upon the assault of commercial propaganda, which is typical of the Capitalistic system, but he uses the aesthetics of Soviet Constructivism (hence anti-capitalistic) political propaganda and (2) he does so for selling products, which is, again, capitalistic behavior. As an example, one can look at the ad series designed by Fairey for the stores Saks Fifth Avenue.

Fairey exploits an ideology against market and profit for selling commodities, hence for the reproduction of market and profit. The choice of the Soviet aesthetics has its roots in the very core of the American Neoliberal culture that Fairey declared he believes in. Think about, for instance, the widespread fear of Communism in US culture, and then to the need for exorcising socialism and communism by banalizing Soviet propaganda. Actually it is because of the existence of the American ideological anticommunist background that Fairey could use Soviet propaganda for selling his products and his image: first and foremost because, still today in the USA, this is the most shocking kind of aesthetics, hence assuring that his own art gains the most significant amount of attention. Fairey can then banalize or ridicule it, for his own messages, and finally he can exploit it for his own commercial aims, which are completely opposed to the original ideological aims of Constructivism.

Fairey not only entextualizes the Constructivist, anti-capitalist style, he also entextualizes keywords such as *dissent*, and symbols of radical protest as the Molotov cocktail<sup>14</sup> and Ernesto *Che* Guevara, which is, at the same time, a popular persona like Marilyn Monroe and a symbol of protest. In the next section I will rest on this last example.

### A case study: Che Guevara pastiche

Given the premises of his art, it was reasonable to expect Fairey to re-interpret Fitzpatrick's image of Che, which is the most famous representation of this celebrity. Interestingly enough, the icon (in a Peircean semiotic sense) of Che, which works as a symbol of rebellion, is one of the clearest examples of the commodification of critique, dissent and protest, as well as the banalization of subversiveness by repetition and entextualization. Before I go on with the analysis, I discuss briefly the Che poster (Figure 4).

This image, which has been reproduced ad infinitum, was created in 1968 by Jim Fitzpatrick.<sup>15</sup> In his webpage, the author himself states: 'I created this, now iconic, image in 1968 in a personal protest to the manner of his death and am proud of what it has become, an international symbol of resistance to oppression.'<sup>16</sup> Fitzpatrick also highlights his opposition to commerce and commodification. What is particularly interesting is the issue of commercial exploitation and intellectual property rights (copyright) for commercial purposes.<sup>17</sup> It is worthy to recall that Fitzpatrick's artwork is based on a Giangiacomo Feltrinelli's reproduction of the picture that Alberto *Korda* Diaz Gutiérrez took in Cuba on 5 March 1960, at the funeral for the victims of the La Coubre explosion (Figure 5).

Fitzpatrick silkscreened it and freely distributed his own work. Concerning the events that ensued when he publicly displayed the poster, Fitzpatrick narrates that: '[it] caused outrage everywhere it appeared [...]; my distributor in Spain was actually arrested by Franco's secret police! But Ireland was the weirdest: Every shop that stocked the poster was threatened or harassed [...]'.<sup>18</sup> Thus this image was a scandal, for its red color, but



**Figure 4.** Jim Fitzpatrick's poster of Che Guevara (1968).

also for the person featured and what he represented: a romantic, young, educated and handsome guerrillero fighting for social justice. At that time exposing the poster was a rebel act, but as for Fairey's image of Che, firstly, there were no space for scandal, due to the anesthetized society it appeared within. Secondly, the biggest difference between Fitzpatrick's and Fairey's images is what Fitzpatrick intended with this photo: paying a tribute to a guerrillero who died for his convictions. No such meaning was attached to Fairey's pastiche, since pictures of the wrestler André the Giant (1997) or of the singer Prince (2003) characterized as Che Guevara are just nonsensical images of





**Figure 5.** The original Alberto Korda's picture used by Fitzpatrick for his poster (1960).

two mass-mediated personae.<sup>19</sup> Plus, these images are created for selling–buying and attracting attention on the brand (OBEY) and their author.

The first poster pastiched Fitzpatrick's image of Che featuring the silkscreened image of André the Giant already used for stickers with the same flat red and black colors. The slogan VIVA LA POSSE (Spanish translation for 'long live the posse') refers to the claim of the first OBEY's sticker 'ANDRÉ THE GIANT HAS A POSSE', featuring the wrestler; the slogan ¡GIGANTE! refers to the wrestler himself, *gigante* being the Spanish translation of *giant*. The second poster features a silkscreened image of singer Prince within the frame of Fitzpatrick's image of Che again with the same flat red and black colors on flat background. The slogan is 'PRINCE AND THE REVOLUTION',<sup>20</sup> followed by a huge slogan ¡OBEY! The use of Spanish (*viva la posse*; *gigante*; and punctuation marks ¡!) refers to the language of Latin American guerrilleros as Ernesto Guevara. This point clearly shows how the inter-semiotic complementarity (Royce, 2007) works: in this case the text has the function of anaphorically reinforcing the meaning of the other mode (image) and at the same time of commenting it and allowing the *détournement*. Nevertheless, references to guerrilla and to revolution are completely depthless, unexpressive, and empty. Fairey banalizes Che's message, through a pastiche of his already clichéd image. Far from being a reflection on the banalization of the icon in a mass-mediated society, it is a second-degree banalization. After the first-degree banalization of the first image, reproduced and sold-and-bought ad nauseam, we face a reproduction of the reproduction, together with a new, uncritical exposition, and obviously with a new commercialization, since OBEY's images are sold and bought. Compared to the shocking impact that Fitzpatrick's image had, Fairey's poster has nothing subversive, even if it refers to an anti-capitalist idol such as Che Guevara, as he does elsewhere with Soviet Constructivism, guerrillas or revolution.<sup>21</sup>

This work seems inspired by Pop Art tradition of depicting popular heroes and celebrities, often parodying them, and refers to both Constructivism and Pop Art, through features as stenciling, red and black colors, flat silhouettes on flat backgrounds, and huge

lettering. Of course Fairey's choice is meaningful: in order to provide his art with some sense of rebelliousness, he uses the masculine angularities and the pure colors (red, black, white) of Constructivism.

As argued above, Fairey's depiction of Che Guevara is a pastiche. As stated by Jameson (1991), pastiche is one of the main features of post-modern cultural production society. Actually Fairey's work is polyphonic and dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986), carries multiple voices and texts re-voiced or entextualized (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). Jameson harshly criticized pastiche, due to its depthless, within a critique of post-modern cultural production as superficial; nevertheless others consider it as a form of cultural critique (Hoesterey, 1995, 2001; see also Rose, 1991). It should be noted that one of the most famous cases of pastiche is Duchamp's paintings of moustached Monna Lisa (Zolberg, 1990).

As the original Fitzpatrick's picture, Fairey's pictures are not naturalistic: they are stylized, flat, bold and simple, with no depth, and no shadows. They are 'coded' images (opposing to the un-coded image of the photograph in Barthes' terms) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 25), which are often used to convey absolute abstract symbolic meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2012). According to Kress and van Leeuwen, Constructivist posters made wide usage of coded images (1996, pp. 29–30). As the authors state, the particular visual style of Constructivism, with artificial shapes (rectangles, triangles, and straight, elongated and diagonal lines) representing technology and suggesting vectoriality (p. 55), was linked to the ideal of changing the world: a new style for producing new social relationships. Yet, none of all these ideological reflections is present in Fairey's art, whose subversion is only superficial.

### Discussion: performativity, oppositional behaviors and commodity activism

It is well known that thanks to the performativity of language (Austin, 1962, [1961] 1979; Butler, 2002) and to the discursive nature of the construction of ethos and self-image (Amossy, 1999, 2001, 2010a, 2010b; Aristotle, 1857, p. 12 and ff.; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958) social actors can represent themselves in a particular way simply by enouncing particular speech acts. So a social actor can *be* or *become* a protester for the mere fact of enouncing – discursively performing – protest. Yet, as De Sousa Santos states, the fact of stating some principles sometimes allows speakers not to behave accordingly:

We live now in a paradoxical society, where the discursive declaration of values is absolutely necessary, but where the dominant social practices make impossible the practical realization of those values. We live in a society dominated by what Saint Thomas Aquinas defined as *habitus principiorum*, i.e. the habit of proclaiming principles for not being obliged to obey them. (2005, p. 110, my translation, my italics)

Since the dominant social practices in our actual society are capitalistic, many social actors *perform* protest, but with their own behavior they contribute to the perpetuation of the system they say they fight against.

Thanks to the way Fairey has built it, the brand OBEY has a rebellious aura, also recognized by consumers. They associate subversive values to the brand, thinking that buying or wearing OBEY product suddenly transform them into activists, in a clear example of what has been defined as 'commodity activism' or 'brand activism' (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee,

2012; Hearn, 2012; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012; see also Banet-Weiser, 2012; Castañeda, 2012; Johnston & Cairns, 2012; for a general overview on Cultural Resistance, see Duncombe, 2002a). Wearing a branded-as-anti-establishment-outfit can be seen as a particular kind of what has been called 'everyday forms of resistance' (Scott, 1985 *apud* Duncombe, 2002a, pp. 89–96; Kelley, 1994 *apud* Duncombe, 2002a, pp. 96–99; on clothes as form of rebellion see also Cosgrove, 1984 and Clarke, [1975] 1993). Nevertheless according to some scholars (Reed, 2000 *apud* Duncombe, 2002a, pp. 99–100) these forms of rebellion are not as rebellious as they seem.

The emancipatory potential of Fairey's practices can be evaluated according to a dichotomy that distinguishes between *oppositional* and *emergent* behaviors (Raiter, 1999). Oppositional behaviors are those made by subjects who seem (or think) to fight against system but by their own behavior they show that they have interiorized the system's ideological assumptions, hence in acting so subjects just reproduce and reinforce the system. Emergent behaviors, instead, are those made by subjects who entirely reject the system's ideological assumptions, acting in a completely new terrain of political struggle which is out of the terrain originally delimited by the system. According to this dichotomy, it seems that Fairey and brand activists act according to the first category of behaviors.

Fairey's art is not only 'simplistic' (Irvine, 2012) or 'depthless [and] subsumed within the economic and cultural system of late capitalism' (Droney, 2010, p. 112), it is instead completely *counter-revolutionary*, that is, not only lacks any emancipatory potential, but is even anti-emancipatory. Fairey's discourse does not threaten the system, and it is rather functional to its perpetuation: (1) he allows neoliberal order to present itself as democratic and free (system allows dissent); (2) he stimulates system's antibody and hence reinforces it: he removes every specialness (for rarity or novelty) to dissent, banalizing it; (3) he feeds capitalistic economy by selling wares and (4) he reinforces system, showing that the only thing that matters is to earn money, no matter how, even by exploiting dissent, people frustration, need for change and claims for social justice. And no matter if this banalization perpetuates the present neoliberal order and makes it harder to change it for the better.

Paradoxical as it may seem, one of the safest methods for disabling dissent is allowing it, and reproducing it under multiple and reiterated forms. This is especially true if what are at issue are not *emergent* but *opposing* forms of dissent. For a system scared by a revolution, the best way to make it impossible is to label as 'revolutionary' a mainstream artist, an advertised product, a capitalist policy (Frank, 1997; Pignotti, 1976). The best way for avoiding revolution is to tolerate and include into the system 'revolutionary' persons, symbols, and discourses whose message is only apparently revolutionary and whose aims do not mine the very basis of the Neoliberal order.

Moreover, if system manages to repeat and multiply (some forms of) dissent, especially those forms more apparently subversive, but actually innocuous, system self-legitimizes as more free than it is.<sup>22</sup> And even when potentially dangerous forms of dissent arise, by including them within its controlled chain of production, distribution and circulation, system gets to appropriate them, disabling them. Actually commodifying dissent not only allows to deactivate it, but also to feed system with dissent itself. This issue is coherent with Judith Butler's idea that the repetition of subversive acts could nullify their subversiveness (2002, p. xxi), but also with what Marcuse said ([1964] 1991) about the capacity

of system for disabling subversive acts incorporating them in its interior (see also Duncombe, 2002b, p. 6).

So, as I argued above, by serially reproducing anti-capitalist idols (Che Guevara), aesthetics (Soviet Constructivism), themes (Molotov cocktail) and words (*dissent*), Fairey provides his own art of some apparent subversiveness. But in serially reproducing and selling these symbols, Fairey deactivates their emancipatory potential. Fairey is then a counter-revolutionary artist in that he exploits anti-capitalistic feelings and symbols for selling wares (which is the capitalistic act par excellence), hence for reproducing and strengthening the system; he is counter-revolutionary in that he makes the system stronger and dissent weaker. This exploitation of anti-capitalist symbols for selling commodities, hence for reproducing market and profit is a capitalist behavior which enacts Fairey's faith in capitalism.

Fairey's case demonstrates the enormous power of Capitalism for commodifying everything. As Kruger shows, even Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party* has been the object of capitalistic exploitation (2006, p. 724). Capitalism is able to transform in wares even the discourses, symbols and the very words that indicate collectivistic ideologies, depriving them of their emancipatory potential. From this perspective, street artists as OBEY are contributing to generating a confusion that impedes recognizing emergent messages from oppositional ones. Moreover OBEY's case proves an ongoing phenomenon of post-modern late-capitalist societies: the performance of protest. By talking about protest, Fairey *becomes* a protester even if he professes his faith in Capitalism and if with his behavior he is strengthening the system preventing from substantive changes. This is an example of what De Sousa Santos calls *habitus principiorum*.

## Conclusions

In this paper I have analyzed the discourse of Shepard Fairey, his artworks as well as his accounts on his art, from a multidisciplinary perspective integrating the sociology of art and the critical analysis of multimodal discourse. My aim was to analyze artistic forms of communication that label themselves as politically engaged, in order to evaluate their actual emancipatory potential. This reflection is important for the field of Critical Discourse Studies since these forms of communication come to colonize discourses of counter-culture and challenges to the mainstream politics, perhaps sometimes diverting from actual true counter-ideology. The paper shows as work of street artists like Fairey are treated as profound and deeply critical even though it is difficult to gather what the exact ideological point is beyond a weak and broader sense of criticism of the establishment. I aimed at showing how some aspects of popular culture widely thought of as criticism, can actually be appropriated by the market losing their subversiveness.

Nevertheless, this study has some limitations. My criticisms to Fairey's work are not meant to discredit him, but rather to stimulate a discussion on the emancipatory role of art as discourse and a reflection on the praxis of artists with emancipatory aims (see below). Another limitation is the fact of having disregarded the existence of different (alternative) models of Capitalism, whereas Fairey's criticisms are arguably directed against one kind of Capitalism. Nonetheless, this of course does not weaken the argument made throughout the paper that Fairey *saves* capitalism, since he believes in it, and *feeds* it with his behaviors.

This last point invites also to reflect on the legitimacy of earning a living as an artist. Positing an opposition between subversive discourse and capitalistic practice only creates a false dilemma, since it is only a revolutionary practice (emergent behavior) that could make a better world, and there are options for a revolutionary artistic discourse/praxis (see also below).

A conceptual limitation of this paper that is inevitably reflected in the analysis is the usage of a dichotomy (oppositional vs. emergent) for classifying artistic discourse and practices in terms of emancipatory potential. Of course there are more nuances in art than a dichotomy can resolve. I have not been able to eschew this dichotomy, and even if I have tried, I ultimately have only renamed it without overcoming it. Nevertheless, from one side the dichotomy becomes relevant in a framework where art is conceived as a socio-economic praxis. From the other, I hope the flaws of this paper will inspire a discussion and stimulate further developments on the role of artists' *discourse and praxis* (to be conceived as socio-economic practices) in the creation of a fairer society, on the commodification of protest and on the possibility of developing artistic and socio-political alternatives. As for this last point, which is related to the three previously mentioned limitations, and as a conclusion, I would like to refer to Demos' (2016) critique of visual activism or visual protest (Philips, 2012) compared to *visual militantism*: the author presents examples of how to produce an artistic emancipatory discourse linked to a revolutionary practice, by avoiding the capitalistic reification and coherently implementing real emancipating behaviors.

## Notes

1. For Sánchez-Bermúdez, Neoliberalism – the current form of capital domination – is the third period of capitalistic domination, characterized by a pattern of domination that he defines as *natural*, that is, as not contained by resistance and the closest to capitalistic nature of wild domination.
2. By the word *system* I refer to the complex set of practices and discourses produced and enacted by social-cultural-economical-political-military-religious elites that work together within the Neoliberal order of the contemporary late-capitalistic societies (which in turn is a result of those élites) in order to maintain and increase their privileges and the actual status quo by all available means, such as laws, education, media, police, politics and so on (see Harvey, 2005; 2007) helped in this by the subalterns, which accept elites' hegemony (Gramsci, 1971).
3. <http://www.andrethegiant.com/index.php>.
4. Note that Fairey himself co-authored this paper.
5. <http://www.obeygiant.com/headlines/support-the-occupy-movement-x-free-downloads>.
6. See Sánchez-Bermúdez (2012). This is one of the main ideas of movements such as Indignados, 15M, Occupy Wall Street and so on.
7. <http://www.obeygiant.com/> [accessed at 16:00, March 21, 2013].
8. <http://www.obeygiant.com/about> [accessed at 16:00 March 21, 2013].
9. The picture of Kruger's artwork is accessible via The Broad Museum website: <http://www.thebroad.org/art/barbara-kruger/untitled-your-body-battleground>.
10. At the following addresses one can find one Warhol's painting of the Campbell Soup can (<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79737?locale=en>) and Warhol's painting of Marilyn Monroe (<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1517?locale=en>).
11. As evidence of the connection between Pop Art and mass industry (in terms of condition of production and selling of artwork and in terms of relationship with mass culture), please notice

that the name of Warhol's studio was The Factory: actually a place where he *industrially produced* art.

12. Pictures of Rodchenko's artworks can be found at the following link: <https://www.moma.org/artists/4975?=&page=2&direction=fwd>.
13. See, for instance, Fairey's campaign for Saks Fifth Avenue, at the following address: <http://www.studionumberone.com/saks/>.
14. In one of his posters one can see a black figure of a person launching a Molotov on a red-yellow background (<https://obeygiant.com/prints/molotov-man/>). It is worthy to note that the Molotov cocktail was invented by Finnish troops in World War II fighting against the Soviet Army, and that, especially since the 1960s is considered as a general symbol of political dissent.
15. <http://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/>.
16. <http://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/myhome/welcome-to-the-art-of-jim-fitzpatrick/>.
17. I consider the issue of copyright and intellectual property a critical issue for subversive messages, authors and so on, since private property itself is a crucial concept of capitalistic ideology.
18. <http://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/che/>.
19. At the following links one can find pictures of the pastiche with Andre the Giant (<https://obeygiant.com/prints/che-reissue/>) and the one with Prince (<https://obeygiant.com/prints/prince/>).
20. Fairey makes an orthographic pun between *prince* and *prints*, due to their homophony. Both are actually transcribed as /'prin(t)s/.
21. Even conceding that OBEY mocks the commercialization of an anti-capitalist idol as Che Guevara or the social control on citizens exerted by USSR through propaganda posters, the critical potential of his work is nullified by the second-degree banalization of the (already banalized) image, and more generally by inserting the criticism in the capitalistic circle of production-advertisement-consumption, that is in itself a form of social control.
22. But, as political theoretician Preve (2002) says, we live in a system which can be defined as an Administrated Pluralistic Field, where choices are possible, but only within the range accepted by the system itself. Obviously choices allowed by the system are not dangerous for its continuity.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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