

Student Name: Louise Carruthers

Student Number: 2404695

Tutors: Alex Duncan and Paul Duerinckx

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Throughout history, printmaking has been used as an essential tool to communicate political and social ideas. I am interested in how printmaking is used by artists to communicate these complex ideas through visual imagery and how the process of printmaking is different to other forms of art to convey these ideas due to its reproducibility which allows an image to be copied multiple times and distributed in a variety of locations becoming a part of everyday life, compared to single forms of art which are may only be located in gallery spaces. This means that it is capable of reaching a wider audience beyond the galleries. Examples of these locations are in the streets, newspapers, magazines and posters. In this essay I am going to explore how these political and social ideas reach audiences through printmaking by looking at the artists Shepard Fairey, Emory Douglas, Francisco Goya and Käthe Kollwitz by using the keyword's repetition, distribution, and communication.

Repetition

One of printmaking's most favourable qualities is its ability to repeat itself. Repetition can reproduce imagery multiple times, allowing work to build recognition by the public and supports political and social ideas. Repetition is capable of amplifying the message behind an image, for example a figure or a word that's a part of the print starts to become familiar, making it become a symbol for the ideas that are being conveyed in the print. The contemporary artist, Shepard Fairey, is a prime example of how repetition in printmaking can be used to reinforce meaning and recognition through figures and words. The work of Fairey is often seen through stickers and posters throughout streets. (Appleford, 2009) *Hope* (2008) is one of Fairey's most prominent pieces of work, becoming one of the most iconic images in campaign history. (Appleford, 2009) *Hope*

was created by Fairey to show his allegiance to Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008, using a news photograph of Obama, and adding a patriarchal essence to it using the colours red, white and blue. The work was originally created depicting Obama wearing Fairey's "Obey Giant" logo with the word 'progress', this was printed and displayed in Los Angeles and Fairey's website. Due to the response that work gained, Fairey was asked by Obama's campaign team to create a version with the word 'hope.' This led to three-hundred thousand copies being printed. (Phaidon) The author Peter Schjeldahl reminisces on Fairey's *Hope* as an Obama supporter writing,

It was only about a year ago, though it feels like half a lifetime, that Shepard Fairey created the most efficacious American political illustration since "Uncle Sam Wants You": the Obama "Hope" poster. I won't forget coming across it, last summer, stencilled on a sidewalk of a hamlet in the upper Catskills, where cell phones don't work and most people, if they vote at all, vote Republican.

(Schjeldahl, 2009)

Schjeldahl's statement about seeing *Hope* proves that the use of repetition is vital for spreading a political message, it demonstrates how the more the image is seen, the more familiar it becomes to the public. Schjeldahl states "if they vote at all, vote Republican," meaning that the poster was capable of reaching areas with opposing views. The message through the simple word 'Hope' and confident image of Obama in the American flag colours is reinforced through the way that it is repeated through the streets in posters, magazines, and online. Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that printmaking can have a further impact compared to artwork in a gallery as it is capable

of reaching a wider audience when it is displayed in everyday environments, much like Fairey's *Hope*.



Figure 1: *Hope* (2008) Shepard Fairey

What began Fairey's graphic pop art style that became increasingly recognisable is the *Obey Giant Campaign* (1989), 'starting with a sticker that would become an unexpected icon, 'Andre the Giant Has a Posse.'" (Goodbody, 2026) This started as a sticker with an image of Andre the Giants face, surrounded by white text, and became widely known across urban landscapes.

At its core, the OBEY campaign functions as a form of cultural rebellion, encouraging viewers to reconsider the systems of control that shape their reality. The use of the word "OBEY" is central to Fairey's critique. By repurposing the techniques of propaganda, using bold, arresting imagery and omnipresent repetition, Fairey forces us to confront the hidden forces that influence our beliefs and behaviours.

(Goodbody, 2026)

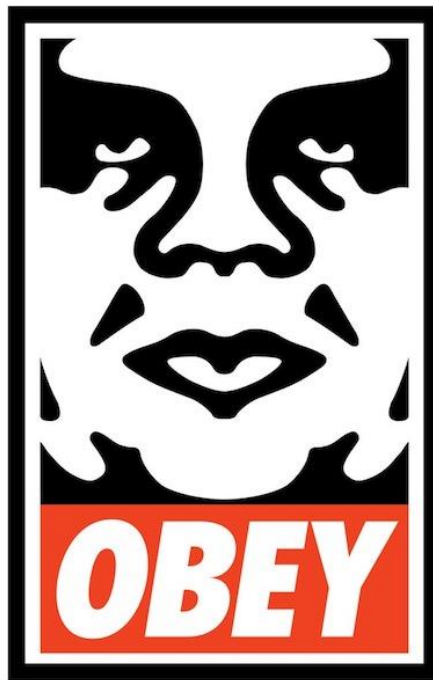


Figure 2: *Obey Giant*, (1995)
Shepard Fairey

Distribution

Distribution connects with the process of repetition. Distribution allows repeated imagery to circulate outside of gallery spaces. When compared to singular pieces of artwork, prints are able to be spread across different locations to increase their impact, unlike original artwork in galleries such as paintings or sculptures. Prints being distributed in streets, posters, newspapers and magazines makes them a part of the public's everyday life, meaning that it can be used as a tool for political and social communication. An artist that used distribution as a tool is Emory Douglas, an American graphic artist, who was the former Minister of Culture and Revolutionary Artist for the weekly newspaper, The Black Panther Party. (MoMA) The Black Panther Party was

established in 1966 and were famously known for their self-defence against police brutality and community programs for helping children and health clinics.(Social Alternative) ‘It’s objective was to advance the social and political interests of the Panthers and to recruit and inform supporters.’ (Frieze) Douglas was the primary artist during the peak of the party during the 1960s to the 1970s, producing images that promoted the party’s mixed agenda of armed militance and community welfare. (Doss, 2007) Douglas’s work was designed to communicate with African American communities, using traditional symbols and visuals. In an article about the art of the Black Panther Party, Duncan writes,

The traditional signifiers of the African American visual lexicon, the mask, and the trickster, and techniques such as parody, repetition, and reversal were encoded in his artwork. Douglas served as a visual griot relating myth and story in his images.

(Duncan, p.120, 2016)

This demonstrates that Douglas used The Black Panther newspaper to spread his images widely but also reach the correct audience. By distributing his work in the newspaper, Douglas was able to directly communicate political messages. During the peak of The Black Panther Party, they sold 250,000 copies each week. (Socialist Alternative) This reinforces the idea that printmaking being distributed is used as a tool for powerful political communication. Without the tactical distribution through the newspapers, Douglas and The Black Panther Party wouldn’t have been able to gain such a large viewing. One of the key examples is Douglas’s *All Power to the People* (1969), depicting a young boy holding a newspaper that reads ‘all power to the people’ and ‘the

black panther party' in bold lettering, around the boys shoulder, he is carrying a weapon, showing the powerful resistance.



Figure 3: *All Power to the People* (1969) Emory Douglas

Another example of Douglas's artwork that was featured in The Black Panther Party is *The Lumpen* (1970). This print depicts two men armed with guns, confronting the viewers and showing resistance. The print is made up of the similar style that Douglas uses with strong black lines and bold contrast. As shown in the previous work *All Power to the People*, most of the figures in Douglas's work are armed with weapons. When these images with similarity are repeated and distributed through the newspapers, they become familiar to the communities.



Figure 4: *The Lumpen* (1970)
Emory Douglas

Communication

Even though repetition and distribution are both important factors in spreading a message through printmaking, communication is what ties it all together. Within every artwork that's based political and social ideas, artists need to be able to communicate what those ideas are through visual imagery. Without clear communication in the work, viewers wouldn't be able to grasp the artists ideas. Clear visual imagery allows political and social ideas to be understood without the need for words, aiming to gain an emotional response. In a lot of the work, the visual imagery may include powerful and strong figures, or emotional and dark imagery. Much like the work of Emory Douglas in The Black Panther Party, communication is a key aspect for artists working through printmaking to convey political and social messages. In Douglas's manifesto, he makes the point 'the goal should always be to make the message clear,' (MoMA) recognising that his artwork can be used as a tool to convey his political messages. Shepard Fairey also communicates visually using colour, text and a strong image to spread the

patriarchal message. A historical example of this is through the work of Francisco De Goya, a Spanish painter and printmaker of the late 18th century and early 19th century. The specific work, *The Disasters of War (1810-1820)*, is a series of etched plates on the war of independence in Spain during 1808 to 1814. The etchings depicted the devastation from the war with no limits. (Bouvier, p.1108, 2011) Goyas's prints focus on the suffering of individuals, the lives that it cost and the result. Author Paul Bouvier describes the etchings,

His depictions of violence are lucid and engaged, without prejudice or complacency, yet sensitive to the suffering of the victims, thereby paving the way for neutral, independent humanitarian action. The engravings also reflect Goya's personal experience of war, as painful as it was traumatic.

(Bouvier, p. 1108, 2011)

Furthermore, Bouvier explains that Goya is inviting viewers into the world of violence that took place during the war and the feeling of humanity had vanished. Goya used the graphic imagery of violence, his work is direct without censorship and forces viewers to confront the realities of the war making it difficult to ignore.



Figure 5: “Ya na hay tiempo” (There isn’t time now) (1810-1820) Francisco De Goya

Another example artist similar to Francisco De Goya that uses imagery in printmaking to communicate ideas is Käthe Kollwitz. *The Weavers Revolt* (1893-1897) by Kollwitz are six etchings and lithographs based on Gerhart Hauptmann’s 1892 play *The Weavers*, which dramatized the 1844 Silesian weavers’ revolt. (Sutton-Mattocks, 2016) The article describes the prints,

The six prints narrate the story of the uprising from its causes – poverty and hunger as a result of rapid industrialization – via planning the uprising, the weavers’ march and their riot at the factory gate, to its aftermath, in which etching we see the grief of women for those killed.

(Sutton-Mattocks, 2016)



Figure 6: *Storming the Gate, A Weavers Revolt*, (1893-1897)
Käthe Kollwitz

Another prime example by Kollwitz that communicates social and emotional ideas through printmaking is *The Woman with Dead Child* (1903). This etching depicts a mother grasping onto the body of her son, pushing unthinkable grief into the image. (Substack) The mother face is buried into the chest of her son. Much like *The Weavers Revolt*, the etching is dark with bold and harsh lines, reinforcing the emotion and using heavy imagery to communicate grief and loss. Both the work of Francisco De Goya and Käthe Kollwitz shows that printmaking has been used as a tool throughout history for communication.

The prints allow viewers to understand the conditions of the suffering individuals, most importantly the women. Kollwitz uses dark and strong lines in her etchings to further intensify that feeling of emotion, meaning that she is a prime example of an artist that communicates political messages through powerful imagery.



Figure 7: *The Woman with Dead Child*, (1903),
Käthe Kollwitz

In a political art manifesto created by Emory Douglas, he highlights the guidelines for the work that he produced for The Black Panther Party, here are some of the key aspects. In the manifesto, Douglas states that art is a “powerful tool a language that can be used to Enlighten, Inform, a guide to Actions.” This shows that Douglas purposely uses his printmaking to be able to convey political messages. He also states that he must “create art of social concerns that even a child can understand.” Douglas is emphasising that his messages in the work must be clear and direct. Lastly, Douglas states that he should “make an effort not to create political art dealing with social issues just because it’s a cool thing to do,” this shows that his work is not made for the aesthetic, they are made to inform and empower communities through urgent political and social messages. (MoMA)

By exploring the three keywords repetition, distribution and communication, I have found printmaking to be a strong medium for political and social communication and how each word connects with each other in this process. Through repetition, imagery becomes recognisable and familiar to viewers, reinforcing their meaning overtime, as

seen in the work of Shepard Fairey. Distribution allows the repeated imagery to be spread further than a gallery space, reaching a wider audience. Lastly, communication ties all of these together as a foundation for those images that have been spread to be understood through powerful and emotional imagery, which has been used throughout history to highlight complex political and social issues by Francisco Goya and Käthe Kollwitz. By looking at each artists work, I was able to find that printmaking has been used as a tool for political and social ideas throughout each era, showing that it's been an effective form of art for a large period of time. The working question that I have come up with based on this essay is: *How does printmaking function as a tool for political and social communication?*

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