

# Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion

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## The Annotated Obama Poster

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## THE ANNOTATED OBAMA POSTER

During the presidential campaign melee of 2008, culture jammer, guerrilla sticker graffitist, Andre the Giant acolyte, and anti-authoritarian skateboard artist Shepard Fairey created what is widely considered one of the most recognizable pieces of political visual rhetoric to emerge in American culture in quite some time: the Barack Obama "HOPE" poster. Although not originally part of the official campaign branding, the design proved so popular that the poster became something of a viral phenomenon, seamlessly playing into the Obama campaign's overall ambience. What is it about Fairey's design that has captivated so many viewers, exactly?

Click on the highlighted areas of the poster for some rhetorical observations about the design and cultural impact of Fairey's masterwork.

Source: Wortham, Jenna. "'Obey' Street Artist Churns Out 'Hope' for Obama." *WIRED* ("Underwire" blog). 21 Sept. 2008. 26 Feb. 2009  
<<http://blog.wired.com/underwire/2008/09/poster-boy-shep.html>>.



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Inspirational or agitprop-lite?



Fairey's design, which depicts Obama in a contemplative, almost heroic pose, bears more than a passing resemblance to the "High Red" propaganda poster aesthetic that has immortalized the likes of Che, Lenin, and Chairman Mao (Fairey himself admits being influenced by Jim Fitzpatrick's iconic Guevara poster). I read the image as teetering on the edge of sincerity: there's a self-awareness to the piece, typical of Fairey's other work, that delves into the ironic, the parodic, a subtle jab to Obama's detractors who delight in speculating aloud on the candidate's secret socialist loyalties. Still, I take pause at the rhetorical effectiveness of Fairey's playful barb. Why go this route when it gives fodder to right-wing detractors who, willfully or honestly, [don't](#) [get](#) the [joke](#)?



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Lending color.



I wonder if Fairey is playing with the concept of racial transcendence here (recall early mentions in the campaign of Obama being a "post-racial" candidate). Obama's skin is superimposed with a red, white, and blue overlay, re-marking him as a new symbol of (patriotic) color. Also, the amateur color-theorist in me notes the muted, desaturated tonal character of the color palette: less red, white, and blue and more pink, cream, and cornflower. To my eye, this decision lends the image a nostalgic quality, and it occurs to me that the palette might function subtly to combat nagging perceptions of Obama's inexperience (green-ness).



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Something old, something new...



Fairey's design utilizes familiar urban tools like stencils, Sharpies, and spray paint, but it also incorporates the more provincial element of **hatching**, a technique commonly used in etchings, engravings, or woodcuts. As with the nostalgia-inducing color palette, this graphical element also seems to function to disarm perceptions of inexperience. This detail lends the overall design (which might otherwise read as contemporary street art) a time-bound quality, reinforcing the Obama-as-icon meme. Visually speaking, the image lives in the same neighborhood as the engraved likenesses of Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, Lincoln, and the other archetypal statesmen gracing our currency.



## THE ANNOTATED OBAMA POSTER

Spoof-worthy.



Like Apple's iPod ads and the "got milk?" campaign, the simple graphic design makes Fairey's poster ripe for spoofing in a variety of cultural contexts: political, popular, religious, etc. The design's gestalt functions like an under-determined symbol, akin to the white whale in the titular *Moby Dick*--its meaning is fluid, ever-changing, and subject to quick-and-easy manipulation. In an interview for the web magazine *frontwheeldrive*, Fairey (who counts McLuhan, Debord, and Heidegger among his influences) explains that his artistic mission is ultimately phenomenological: "The first goal of phenomenology is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment" (277). This strong cultural desire to play with and transform Fairey's iconography apparently demonstrates that very sense of wonder.

Source: Christopher, Roy. "Shepard Fairey: Giant Steps" (Interview). *Follow for Now: Interviews with Friends and Heroes*. Ed. Roy Christopher. Seattle: Well-Red Bear Press, 2007. 277 - 282.

The spoof examples included in the image above come from *The Guardian*:  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/gallery/2008/nov/10/art-uselections2008?picture=339463611>.



## THE ANNOTATED OBAMA POSTER

Beg, borrow, steal?



If an artist reappropriates an image into one of the most iconic political posters of all time and no one notices it for several months, does it make a sound argument for Fair Use? Over the past few weeks, the Associated Press has been in talks with Fairey regarding credit and compensation for his appropriation of their wire photograph (on a stranger side-note: photographer Manny Garcia alleges that he owns the photo's copyright, as he was working as a freelancer for AP at the time and retained the rights to his work). In a pre-emptive move meant to curtail potential legal hassles from the Associative Press, Fairey has filed suit alleging that his poster is protected under the Fair Use clause of U.S. copyright law. At issue here are such points as the derivative's degree of transformation from the original (is it sufficiently different?), the purpose or nature of the derivative (art vs. photojournalism), and the derivative's impact on the marketplace (Has Fairey dampened AP's/Garcia's

opportunity to profit from the original photograph?).

Multimodal compositionists are sure to be watching, collective breath bated, how this tale unfolds, as it is the first major copyright case of the digital age. The outcome will likely establish a precedent that will have a far-reaching impact on those who create (or have their students create) mashups, parodies, collages, montages, and similar digital texts that often incorporate other content.

*Source:*

Fairey, Shepard. Interview with Terry Gross. *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*. WHYY, Philadelphia. 26 Feb. 2009.

The thumbnail image above is of Garcia's original AP photograph.



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The space 'twixt word and deed.



Words mean things, I've been told, so I can't help but to ponder Fairey's use of the term "HOPE" (and other design variants featuring the word "CHANGE" as well as the original "PROGRESS"). I'm struck by the consistent use of terms that exhibit nominal/verbal ambiguity: they function simultaneously as ineffable nouns and verbs, resistant to semantic clarity. Are we meant to see Obama as the embodiment of HOPE? Or is he instead hailing me, the viewer, to HOPE? Is he himself the vessel of CHANGE or urging me to CHANGE (and if so, CHANGE what, exactly)? This ambiguity keeps me thinking, making the design slightly more "sticky" than it might have been with a more straightforward term. The all-caps, sans serif font, in keeping with the official campaign branding, adds to the effect, vacillating between static and iconic (the nominal representation of "thingness") and loud and vocal (the shouty verbal imperative used in so many conspiracy-theory-laden chain emails).

Source: "Shepard Fairey." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 28 Feb. 2009, 10:55 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 28 Feb. 2009. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shepard\\_Fairey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shepard_Fairey)>.