

Georgina Williams
Winchester School of Art

Painting, Print, Poster: Gauging the Values of the Image as an Object

In assessing and analysing an image there is an argument to support the idea that 'In decoding messages from the other side we get more meaningful results if we use their code rather than ours'.¹ The context within which an artwork is created needs to be borne in mind, albeit whilst maintaining an awareness of the issue of intentional fallacy. What is arguably being avoided with this premise, however, is the notion that context in areas of art history and visual culture alters when each subsequent generation inscribes upon the image its own thoughts and ideas, its own analyses of intention. Realistically, the contextual considerations surrounding a viewer's perception of an artwork cannot be ignored in the interpretation of that work; each viewer is influenced, not only by the era in which their evaluation is made, but also by personal circumstances because of his or her own understanding of what the visual constructs including any text – singularly as well as collectively – represent, instilled within the viewer via a combination of traditions and memory traces through education and inheritance.

Roland Barthes observes that whereas at one point it was imagery that clarified text, more latterly the 'text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, a relationship'.² A title, a caption, or other textual augmentation signposts the viewer to a preferred interpretation and unless it is contrived by the artwork's creator at the time of inception it arguably cannot adequately connote the artist's original intention, nor legislate for that which may affect the viewer as the distance between conception and perception of the work increases. This idea of signposting the viewer is aptly reflected in C. R. W. Nevinson's 1917 painting *Paths of Glory*. Nevinson encountered difficulties in relation to this portrayal of fallen World War I soldiers from the department

dedicated to propaganda that had been 'secretly established' in England in 1914; even though it was recognised that 'words' were going to be insufficient in achieving its objective, no picture conceived in France could include 'the dead body of a British soldier'.³ Nevinson's intent was blatant when he originally titled his painting *Dead Men*, before changing this to *Paths of Glory*. He also toyed with the caption *Shall Their Sacrifice be in Vain?*⁴ Even if these titles do not specifically reflect alternate versions of the reality of war conveyed through the subject matter, it nonetheless demonstrates how easy it can be to evoke conflicting contexts to the viewer simply by adding to the image a layer of text which has been calculatedly composed. In this respect Nevinson's eventual chosen title is in itself misleading – and it is reasonable to assume intentionally so – as it is a phrase from Thomas Gray's eighteenth century *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard* and the complete line reads 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave'.⁵ It is significant to reflect upon this in the context of Barthes' observation, and it is a concept further epitomised when specific temporal considerations are taken into account – in this example, the First World War propaganda requirements that representations of the dead should be 'rigidly suppressed'.⁶ This objective was challenged by Nevinson with his response that his picture 'happened to be a work of art'.⁷ Nevinson's argument constitutes an interesting perspective in the sense that it is suggestive of this particular soldier-artist's aesthetic priority, and the points reflected upon above are indicative of the additional values that the layers of a constructed image contain and how the differing relationships between them inform the subsequent impact of the whole. To emphasise his displeasure regarding the situation surrounding *Paths of Glory*, Nevinson exhibited the work in 1918 with the word "censored" emblazoned across it,⁸ that Nevinson physically covered his own, original image as a way to not only emphasise his point but also to still exhibit endorses the idea that an image's value changes depending on its use, appropriating additional functions in the process. In this regard Marshall McLuhan's concept of 'The Medium is the Message'⁹ can, as an example, be applied to Nevinson's painting in the strict context of its uses: the untitled painting and its compositional connotations; the painting with each of its three prospective titles, which may or may not affect those connotations as well as the viewer's ultimate perception of the imagery; the painting with an additional, alternate caption in the form of not only the word "censored" in and of itself but also the physical introduction of a further object in its own right in the medium of the banner upon which the word is inscribed. In considering this latter aspect in particular, Nevinson's original, effectively *counter-propagandist* image conceived on the battlefields of France as an albeit arguably-unintentional response to the official British propaganda campaign, attained a feasibly-deliberate supplementary *propagandist* implication because of his specific use of the provocative word "censored" – a word that carries added weight and therefore value because of the temporal context of World War I.

Keeping these latter points in mind, it is of note to consider Walter Benjamin, who focuses further attention on McLuhan's concept of the "Medium" being the "Message" when he writes that

Reproductive technology ...removes the thing reproduced from the realm of tradition. In making many copies of the reproduction, it substitutes for its unique

*incidence a multiplicity of incidences. And in allowing the reproduction to come closer to whatever situation the person apprehending it is in, it actualizes what is reproduced*¹⁰ [italics in the original]

Reproducibility confers an accessibility to, and recognition of, artworks that consequently 'shift the sites of reception and confer a sense of common ownership over the image',¹¹ an idea expanded not only by the actual reproduction but also by the extended distribution of the multiple over the single image. It can reasonably be assumed that this "common ownership" is not restricted to the imagery as a completed construction, but includes the varying components employed within and around the compositions, what it is that each may or may not serve to represent, and consequently their respective values in the resultant collation of the image as a whole. Furthermore, this idea of reproducibility can be viewed from a supplemental perspective, and Nevinson's conflict artwork serves as an apposite example: machinic replication is applicable to the ways in which this artist revisited distinctive compositional elements within a specific body of his work. The images include the charcoal and crayon *Study for Returning to the Trenches* c1914, the 1914 oil painting *Returning to the Trenches*, the woodcut *On the Way to the Trenches* from 1915, and the 1916 pastel titled *Marching Men*. Even taking into account preparatory studies for future works, Nevinson's use of repetition is of interest when considered in the context of how it relates not only to the subject matter and compositional elements contained *within* each of these images, but also to what is effectively a *reproduction* of each image, and therefore the attributable values of the same. This is further enhanced when an artist's preparatory work is subsequently considered to have value as an object in and of itself.

There is, however, a difference between artwork intended as an original piece of work that is subsequently reproduced, for example in the form of prints (whether of a limited edition or otherwise), and artwork purposely designed *in order* for it to be reproduced, as is the case with the poster. Nevinson's woodcut *On the Way to the Trenches* can arguably be said to straddle the boundary between an original and a mechanical reproduction in the form of the poster, because of the ability for this particular medium to create an 'exactly repeatable pictorial statement'.¹² It is therefore pertinent to reflect upon Benjamin's comments regarding the possibility that the reproducibility of a work of art takes priority over the actual work of art, investing it with 'new functions' that may in fact render the aesthetic 'function' as ancillary.¹³ The motivations behind the creation of an artwork intended to stand alone as an original differ from those related to the creation of artworks designed for reproduction purposes. Where the two intersect, however, is in their 'display value':¹⁴ an initial work of art may have value as an original piece that alters once it is displayed, and this latter attribute therefore allies it more with the poster because the poster is an object designed *specifically* for display, with any value therefore assessed accordingly and in addition to the value of the message conveyed. Moreover, the message itself consists of "values" that stem from the components, including text and visual constructs, which serve to aid in the message's distribution. Of equal significance in this regard is the issue of retention; if it can be said that collections hold artworks that "deserve[s]" to be retained¹⁵ whether displayed or otherwise, then the poster as an aesthetic object demonstrates a rather

paradoxical example. This is not only because its function means it is simply not designed to be preserved, but also because it lends itself to being adapted to suit specific purposes of a given moment. The physical poster is generally created to have a short life, pasted onto billboards for quick and easy distribution of the message, constantly replaced to keep pace with changing circumstances as well as to retain the interest of the crowd. Historically, the paper on which the poster is printed is often of inferior quality and easily spoiled, even without taking into account natural wastage through its exposure to the elements once posted. The poster is not intended as an artwork with an 'auric mode of being' that possesses a value representative of it existing as "one-of-a-kind"¹⁶ – a value often decreed by the museums that hold these artworks, with the consequence that they are separated from their own reality once removed from their original context.¹⁷ A single poster captured as a signifier of an epoch is a productive example of this premise, isolated as it is from its purpose as a contributory "exactly repeatable pictorial statement" forming part of a mass saturation within a precisely-defined context, including the specifically-focussed advertising or propaganda campaign. Benjamin defines 'aura as a "unique manifestation of a remoteness, no matter how near it may be"',¹⁸ whereas a primary function of the poster is that it is *not* seen as a remote object, as its very accessibility and facility for reproduction is at the centre of its success as a medium for conveying visual information to the masses.

In order to expand upon these ideas it is of note to acknowledge McLuhan's belief that

The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance. The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.¹⁹

McLuhan's use of the term "technology" clearly brings to mind technological devices, including those designed for mass communication, as they pertain to contemporary advances and with a specific emphasis on an artist's potential manipulation and utilisation of the technology and the subsequent effects these may then have on the viewer. However, these assertions, written as they were in the middle of the last century, can be allied to *all* technological changes, reaching back to include Johannes Gutenberg's contribution to the printing press, and the emergence of the "exactly repeatable pictorial statement". This therefore serves to underscore the points formerly made regarding the varying influences upon a viewer's perception and subsequent analysis of an image, as such considerations are no less imperative in the process in the twenty-first century as they were in Gutenberg's time, more than half a millennium ago. These exponential advances in technology not only aid in the reproduction of imagery as well as the distribution of the information contained within, they also promote a means by which the message *and* the medium can be easily archived for the sake of posterity, thereby formulating another aspect by which the viewer can be affected. The viewing of a painting, print, or poster through, for example, a digital medium, generates a supplemental layer which subsequently confers additional value to the image, and the viewer's perception of that image is unsurprisingly altered in the process. This somewhat ironic ability for technology to

prolong the “life” of an image as an object and, therefore, arguably the physical integrity of the painting, the print, and the poster, may significantly enhance the “codes” surrounding the original, which in turn aids in the subsequent “de-coding”. Nevertheless, what is simultaneously enforced is the premise that contemporaneous contexts inevitably affect each viewer’s recognition and evaluation of the same, and it is unproductive to consider an interpretation of an image without taking these influences into account.

- ¹ SHEARMAN, J. (1967) *Mannerism* London: Penguin Books, p.136
- ² BARTHES, R. (1977) *Image Music Text* Trans: HEATH, S. London: Fontana Press, p.26
- ³ VINEY, N. (1991) *Images of Wartime: British Art and Artists of World War 1* Newton Abbot: David & Charles plc [images © 1991 The Imperial War Museum], pp.21-22
- ⁴ WALSH, M. J. K. (2002) *C.R.W. Nevinson: This Cult of Violence* New Haven: Yale University Press p177
- ⁵ GRAY, T. (1955) *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard* London: The Rodale Press, p.12
- ⁶ WALSH, M. J. K. (2002) *Op. Cit.* p177
- ⁷ *Ibid.* p.177
- ⁸ *Ibid.* pp.178-9
- ⁹ MCLUHAN, M. (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd p7
- ¹⁰ BENJAMIN, W. (2008) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Trans: UNDERWOOD, J. A. London: Penguin Books Limited, p.7
- ¹¹ CLARK, T. (1997) *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture* London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, pp.60-61
- ¹² IVINS, W. M. (1969) *Prints and Visual Communication* Cambridge: The MIT Press, p.180
- ¹³ BENJAMIN, W. (2008) *Op. Cit.* pp.12-13
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.13
- ¹⁵ CLIFFORD, J. (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* Cambridge: Harvard University Press p231
- ¹⁶ BENJAMIN, W. (2008) *Op. Cit.* p11
- ¹⁷ HAINARD AND KAEHR in CLIFFORD, J. (1988) *Op. Cit.* footnote, p.231
- ¹⁸ BENJAMIN, W. (2008) *Op. Cit.* endnote, p.39
- ¹⁹ MCLUHAN, M. (1964) *Op. Cit.* p18