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Communication Design:
Speaking through ones T-shirt

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Introduction

The t-shirt emerged in the early 20th century. It was introduced as part of a two-piece men's underwear created by P.H. Hanes Knitting Company. (1) Since that time its function and meaning has changed considerably. This piece of apparel has changed its destiny from being a piece of underwear to becoming a piece of outerwear. Not only has its role in Western culture changed, it has also become an important tool through which art, ideology, and popular culture can unite and create a new ways of communication. The T-shirt uses art in order to communicate meaning with its audience. By attaching meaningful design to what we wear we use our biological bodies in order to communicate our cultural bodies.

Scholars through time have devoted their time to research topics such as design, communication and apparels. Each of these topics in them self surround issues that are related to ways in which western culture functions. These three topics are going to be the main focus of this paper. Together they will demonstrate how t-shirt prints have come to be seen not only as art but also as non-verbal communication in a time when images are becoming superior to the spoken and written word. Although they all have been discussed separately, it is of interest of this research to merge these areas of research in order to take in hand what seems to be a new cultural trend, t-shirt communication through visual design.

The development of the t-shirt is one that should be studied more carefully as it has become part of a change in today's society. In his book *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard states "(...) creative production, art if you like, is given both positive and negative valuations" he then continues by referring to other scholars (Wilson) who have said that fashion or clothing is "(...) 'shocking' the culture that we live in, while simultaneously

expressing the ‘heart’ of that culture, saying something essential or true about it.” (Barnard, 4) This meaning that clothing expresses itself both inside and outside its culture. For wearing of a t-shirt does not only express and communicate the individuality and identity of the person wearing it, it also reveals cultural values and change when observed from the “outside”. To study the t-shirt as something more than just a piece of clothing we must approach its different component to see exactly how and why they could contribute to a deeper meaning. Design and communication studies will help show how the T-shirt has evolved to be a popular and important communication tool of our community.

In *Fashion as Communication* Barnard speaks of “various potential sources of meaning”. He includes the designer, the wearer, and the spectator as examples. All of these are relevant to the issues that are being brought up in this paper; design, communication, and clothing. The designer is of course linked together with the design process. The design process could be said to be the first step stone in what Barnard calls “potential sources of meaning”. Surely, one must not forget the cultural context in which the designer works, for it is the milieu that shapes the creator of a product. The discussion on communication brings us to a more complex matter. When saying that something or someone is communicating, one needs to identify the communicator and what is being said. The “speaker” could surely be the designer, as well as the wearer and the spectator. Meaning could be brought forward by any of these three sources. The meaning of a t-shirt design could vary depending on the spectator’s interpretation. These are all issues that will be raised later on in this paper.

John Fiske talks about two main schools of communication in his book *Introduction to Communication Studies*. In *Fashion as Communication* Barnard points to Fiske’s theories of communication to show how clothing in that sense becomes the medium through which communication is implemented:

The first of these two schools may be referred to as the 'process' school, as communication is conceived as a process in which someone says something to someone else in one or other medium or channel with some or other effect. On this account, a garment, an item of fashion or clothing, would be the medium or channel in which one person would 'say' something to another person with the intention of effecting some change in that other person.

(Barnard, 30)

If one would to think like Fiske, the t-shirt could singly be a part of Barnard's "potential sources of meaning". It would then become even more difficult to distinguish the focal source of meaning in clothing communication. Not to say that there has to be one main source. Barnard states that "The message on this account is the sender's intention and it is this that is transmitted by the garment in the communication process. The message is also, of course, what is received by the receiver." Meaning that the message is what was created by the designer or the wearer of the product and transferred through the apparel (the t-shirt). The message is also what the spectator of the apparel creates by simply viewing the t-shirt. The question then is if a message can be delivered without necessarily having a meaning. Barnard claims, "It does not seem to be the case that anyone ever thinks that someone else is wearing something meaningless. Nor does one look at someone's clothing and think, "I wonder what they mean by that?" In the case of the t-shirt however, it might actually become a case of questioning the message of the design. I would argue that since design and communication are seen to be such powerful forces of information, they must and will raise questions to the spectators mind concerning the meaning of a t-shirt design, especially when the "message" is put directly on to the human body.

In his second book *Art, Design and Visual Culture* Malcolm Barnard uses Plato's allegory of the cave to explain how Plato, "writing around 420 BC, used an extended visual metaphor (...) to describe human knowledge." Although Plato's visual metaphor was intended to describe "the difficulties involved in human knowledge" (Barnard, 4) it will be used here to argue for the use of visual stories. Plato did not use an illustration to tell the story of the cave, he used words. Still, he did attempt to draw an image of an event inside the minds of his audiences. The allegory of the cave shows a method used by many before; the "picturing" of things. This example is of favor to visual design. The shadows set on the prisoners' walls in the story could be compared to the "shadows" set on different mediums in today's society. Like the television, the book, and the apparel. What we as humans see on a canvas, no matter what form it has, is not necessarily the truth or a correct representation of the "real". What matters is the fact that we can understand and talk in images and metaphors. The simile of the cave allegory and modern society shows that by observing social structures and ways in which we *see* things and handle them it will give us knowledge about our own culture and how we could use it to our advantage.

The motive behind this research paper is mainly based on my belief that it is a contemporary cultural matter that has not been addressed enough. As it was mentioned earlier, design and communication are fields that have been of great interest to many scholars. By the end of this paper there will be a more profound knowledge about what a T-shirt really is. What its role has been and how it has changed to this age of time. The t-shirt is the medium and it defines the culture that we are living in. I will also bring attention to design studies. Design as communication is an important topic that will be investigated into. When talking about messages and design, Barnard says:

(...) the sender's intention is important: it is the message, after all, and it must be in principle retrievable or discoverable. A message that remains forever unavailable is not strictly a message and communication cannot take place under such circumstances. The efficiency or effectiveness of the transmission process is important: if the message does not arrive at the receiver or if it arrives in a different or distorted form, then a part of the communication process, maybe the medium, is seen as having failed in some way. And the effect on the receiver is important in that it is the effect on the receiver that constitutes social interaction on this account; social interaction is defined here as 'the process by which one person (...) affects the behaviour, state of mind or emotional response of another.

(Barnard, 30-31)

This shows the importance of good communicative design. It also shows the relevance of the topic when talking about non-verbal t-shirt communication.

Since this is a study of non-verbal communication through clothing, it is not odd that one of the main sections of this paper will be on exactly that, communication. By using Karl Erik Rosengren's book as a communication reference, I will study pertinent forms of communication that can be applied to the study of the t-shirt and its silent messages to its audience. Rosengren writes "Over the millennia, human beings have used various media to communicate in space and time: wood and stone, parchment and paper; fire, smoke, flags and semaphores; electricity and electromagnetic waves." (Rosengren, 1) It seems that the time has come for the human body, the t-shirt, and visual design to together generate a triple-media in communication studies. To Rosengren, attraction is a form of communication. He

claims that plants may even communicate. “Think, for instance, of the way flowers attract bees and other insects.” Although this statement makes a quite broad definition of the word communication, it becomes evident how many different forms of communication that exists without many even seeing them as being communicative tools. This makes it interesting to see how the t-shirt can manipulate the eyes of the spectator to see a message and meaning without even being aware of it.

Functions of the T-shirt

When the T-shirt became known in the early 1900s, it was in no way intended to be seen as the aesthetic, expressive and ideological piece of clothing that it has become today. Taken under consideration that an investigation into the history of function of the T-shirt might be fairly narrow this section will focus on the function of clothing in general. Using Malcolm Barnard’s book *Fashion as Communication* I have chosen to approach some of the previous discussions made in this area, and subsequently compared them to the current role of the T-shirt.

The wearing of clothing might be seen by some people as a subject that has no great depth. Some might suggest that this “simple” activity does not need to be studied at all. We wear what we wear and there is nothing more to it. To think in such a way is clearly a mistake. From the moment that a piece of apparel has been chosen, thoughts have started to flow both mentally and physically with the wearer as well as the people that he or she encounters. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood have argued that “(...) while individual items of fashion or clothing may be neutral or innocent, the uses to which they are put, the

functions they fulfil, are not” (Barnard, 40). This statement manifests that the studying of clothing and its functions is no less important than any other form of cultural practice.

In his book *Sartor Resartus* Thomas Carlyle explains that the garment’s first purpose was ornament. He states that “the first spiritual want of a barbarous man is Decoration (...)”(Barnard, 49). Carlyle’s argument, which he brings forward through his imaginary Professor, Professor Teufelsdröckh, is an interesting approach to the history of garment. If one would to accept this claim, it is exciting to see how the need for ornament as a purpose for clothing has not changed to this day. Still today, when we choose what to wear, we do it to please our own and our observers’ senses. This is not to say that the only reason to why we get dressed is to bring pleasure to the eye, but it certainly does affect many of us in our choices of clothing.

Alison Lurie talks about the communicative function of the garment in her book *Language of Clothes*. Barnard quotes her saying “we put on clothing for some of the same reasons as we speak; these are to make life easier, to proclaim or disguise our identity and to attract sexual attention” (Barnard, 51). The T-shirt could surely “make life easier” in its casual and comforting every-day design. The T-shirt also reflects on the identity of both its creator and wearer. Only by wearing a T-shirt it has become easier for individuals to reveal their beliefs and cultural status. This has been made possible by various forms of T-shirt design. In the same way that identity is brought forward through T-shirts, it can also be obscured. For example, the T-shirt does not make any vast distinction between the male and female body. Its form is invariable, no matter what sex its wearer has. With its form, the T-shirt could be said to erase some of its wearer identity. Although it could be argued that the distinguishing between the male and female body is not an important factor in person’s identity.

James Laver has approached clothing and its relation to immodesty and gender roles. In *Fashion as Communication* Barnard puts forward Laver's "Seduction Principle ... Utility Principle and Hierarchical Principle" and refers to the first and last of these principles to be what Laver uses to "explain the differences in the sorts of display that are achieved by men's and women's dress".

(...) women's clothes are intended to make the wearer more attractive to the opposite sex because, throughout history and prehistory, men have selected 'partners in life' on the basis of the woman's attractiveness. Men's clothes, however, are intended to display and 'enhance social status' because women, 'for the greater part of human history', have selected their life partners on the basis of their ability to 'maintain and protects a family'

(qtd. in Barnard, 57-58)

Looking at the cultural status of some countries in the Middle East it is not hard to see that this argument does not apply to all circumstances. And judging from Laver's analysis, the T-shirt does undeniably go against both his Seduction Principle for women and Hierarchical Principle for men. Of course, both these principles can be found in the function of the T-shirt, but it never becomes a question of sex. The wearer, regardless of gender, can show social status and attract sexual attention depending on the brand of the T-shirt and how appealing others find its design. Although T-shirts may be cut differently depending on the gender of the wearer, the outward appearances of the cuts do not differ much from each other. As a result T-shirt both reveals and conceals some of the identity of its wearer.

Another essential function of clothing is protection. This includes protection against "the cold, the heat, accidents incidental to dangerous occupations and sports (...) human or

animal enemies and physical or psychological dangers”. (Barnard, 51) According to Functionalist anthropologist Malinowski, bodily comfort is the result of the basic physical need of the human. We simply create what our bodies need in order to survive certain conditions. Thereafter we simply recreate the already existing forms of protection into new, more advanced forms. We upgrade our “caves” alongside with the development of our culture. Elizabeth Rouse agrees to the fact that the function of the garment is to satisfy our needs. Yet, she notifies her readers about girls in the 1960s who despite the snow and cold weather outdoors would get dressed “only in the briefest of mini skirts and coats” (qtd in Barnard, 53). This description proves that it would be unwise to propose that the function of garment is primarily to protect the body. Similar to Rouse’s example of mini skirts, some might choose to wear a T-shirt on diverse occasions, regardless of time and space, and with no conscious desire of protecting their bodies.

In Christianity, emphasis has been put on the soul as opposed to the body. Christianity “(...) teaches that paying attention to the care and luxury of the body is ‘prejudicial to the salvation of the soul’, and one of the best ways of diverting attention from the body is to hide it. Hiding the body by means of clothes thus becomes associated with the desire to avoid feelings of sin and shamefulness” (Barnard, 53). Leading us on from previous functions of clothing, the Christian function of the garment has to do with modesty and hiding of the body instead of revealing it. Seeing the body as part of ones identity it becomes questionable whether or not Christianity really puts soul before the body. The soul belongs to the body and in that sense to hide the body is also to hide a part of ones soul. However, a T-shirt could be said to enhance the superiority of the soul. For the T-shirt does in fact cover the body and through its diverse designs and material form it puts weight on the interior of the wearer in

preference to the exterior. The question then remains whether the T-shirt is deflecting attention from the body or if in fact, it is attracting attention to the body.

Barnard speaks of these issues and implies that people have argued that it is the job of clothes to

(...) attract attention to the body rather than to deflect or repel that attention. The body, then, is more openly on display according to the immodesty argument, rather than being hidden or disguised, as it is according to the modesty argument. (...) while the modesty stressed that a move towards full or proper humanity was accomplished with the wearing of clothes, the argument concerning immodesty stress the move towards a more animal-like status that is accomplished by wearing clothes.”

(Barnard, 57)

Although it seems sensible to imply that the T-shirt reveals private, more inner thoughts of its wearer through design, it would be wrong not to mention its ability to draw attention to the exterior as well. It is a difficult task to decide which one of these, the interior or exterior, it is that the T-shirt is accenting. It would be more rational to say that the T-shirt does both. While it reveals parts of the identity and ideology of its wearer, it does not put the soul over the body as in Christian beliefs. It draws the same amount of attention to the body of its wearer and the form and “identity” of its own material. In the quotation above, Barnard speaks of the garment’s purpose being to attract attention to the body. Although this is agreeable, I would like to suggest that the purpose of the T-shirt is to attract attention to the body, the “soul”, and also vice versa. The body’s role is to bring attention to the garment and its design. While it has become a cultural “acceptance” code to cover some of

our body parts we use our bodies, who are on display, to tell our surroundings who we are. Consequently, the body helps us to reveal ourselves through the form and design of what we wear and what we wear brings attention to the body. Essentially, human beings are “animal-like” species that seek the acceptance of others while simultaneously trying to express themselves through the ways they behave.

These different suggestions on the purpose of clothing have been brought up to show the real complexity to what we wear. No function is by itself the reason to why we wear clothing. A T-shirt might be chosen for its aesthetic, communicative or protective features. Regardless of the reasons, it cannot be overlooked that the meaning of our accessories, in this case being the T-shirt, has altered through time. The meaning of the T-shirt changed from being a piece of underwear to becoming a piece of art which can be studied and interpreted in many ways. It is these changes that make the studying of apparels’ important. The reasons to why we wear it, its background and its communicative aspects will lead us to more knowledge about ourselves and our culture. The focus of this paper is primarily on the T-shirt and its ability to communicate through design. This communicative feature can be found in all the examples of function above. For instance, immodesty in clothing may communicate a person’s sexuality.

Sources of Meaning

As mentioned above Barnard has spoken of “various potential sources of meaning” when addressing the meaning of apparel’s. These included the designer, the wearer and the spectator. This section will look upon these different sources to see where meaning comes from, how it is perceived and why it is so vital for communicating though T-shirt designs. Barnard uses Plato’s *Defence of Socrates* to recognize the difficulty of meaning giving. When Socrates asks the poets what their poems mean the poets are unable to answer him.

Socrates comments that “even passers-by in the streets often have a better idea of what the poems are about than the poets”. (Barnard, 75) What Socrates recognized was the inability to point out one central source of meaning. Although it is the designer that is the first “step-stone” in the creating of a T-shirt design and it is his ideas that have been put on the body of the wearer, it should never be presumed that the vision and interpretation of a designer is constant. John Bowers speaks of meaning from a postmodern sense in his book *Introduction to Two-Dimensional Design: Understanding Form and Function* where he refers to Jacques Derrida’s writings. Derrida has declared that language and form are not “neutral but carry cultural assumptions. Bowers continues referring to Derrida study and states

Meaning is arbitrary, unstable, and has to be discovered by each reader. Forms based on this position seek to reveal many meanings of a single message and allow for multiple interpretations.

(Bowers, 19)

Meaning changes depending on its source and is spread amongst all those who observe and act upon their observations. Communication is passed around and each thread in the making of a T-shirt design, whether it is the hands or ideas of its creator, the body of its wearer or eye of its spectator has the power of recreating the meaning of it.

In *Fashion as Communication*, Barnard also mentions “the two kinds of explanations commonly given for the origin of or generation of meaning” (Barnard, 73). These two explanations contain the notion of meaning being produced from outside and inside a garment. He places the designer, the wearer and presumably the spectator as the meaning that is generated from outside the garment. The meaning that comes from within the garment is counted for as the garment itself. This attests that the meaning coming from outside is the

meaning that is supplemented on a piece of clothing. The thoughts, ideologies, and cultural status of the designer, the wearer and the spectator are all factors that add meaning to the T-shirt from outside its existing form. The meaning coming from inside is “the garment or ensemble itself in textures, colours and shapes and the permutations of these colours, shapes and textures” (Barnard, 73). The colours, shapes and textures that are mentioned could evidently be seen as part of aesthetics that have been decided by the designer. On the other hand, seeing it from a cultural stand point, meaning the changes of forms and purposes of the T-shirt throughout history, one could positively identify those as meanings generated from the inside. That is precisely what is being argued for in this paper; the T-shirt does not only communicate and give meaning through its various forms of design, it also communicates change in society by being observed from the “outside”. Thus, the already discussed “potential sources of meaning” exist in conjunction with yet another potential source of meaning, the garment itself.

Whether a design is created to be printed on a T-shirt, used on the web, or attached on a wall, the thoughts and beliefs of its designer will determine what the result of its facade will be.

(...) meaning is a product of the designer’s intentions, where intentions are defined as a person’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires about the world and the things in it. Thus, those thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires that the designer has are somehow expressed or reflected in the garment/ensemble that s/he produces.” (Barnard, 74)

Similar to the ways that a designer’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires matter in his performance, the wearer choice when purchasing a T-shirt is determined by what he or she

feels suits his or her thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires. The spectator then interprets what is seen and decides if he or she likes or dislikes the message that he or she believes the T-shirt (wearer/designer) is giving. They all act upon their own experiences and tastes. It is important here to stress the inconstant flowing of meaning. Since meaning is sent as information through the medium to a receiver, and thereafter interpreted by the receiver, it would be incorrect to argue that meaning is the product of one of the sources of meaning. In a post-modern sense one could declare that there is no one truth but several layers of it. In T-shirt design there is no one interpretation, there is the designer's truth, the wearer's truth and the spectator's truth. They all bring with them different interpretations of the world they live in and can therefore never singly be the producer of meaning. "If meaning was the product of what the designer [wearer/spectator] was thinking about, then there could be no alternative interpretation of that meaning, and people would not be able to appropriate the means of garment and adapt them to their own interpretation". (Barnard, 74) When looking at a piece of art, it is important for the human mind to be able to create its own conception of what it means. This ability of forming ones own interpretation would be disabled if the designer or any of the other of the potential sources of meaning where singly the producer of meaning. If we would not have this ability, there would be no art. Art/design is born through the senses of its creator, meaning the interpretation of what he or she sees and then re-creates through his or her own work.

Design studies and the T-shirt

It would be hard not to notice the evolution of T-shirt designs in modern culture. Although the shape of the T-shirt has stayed consistent throughout the years its frontage has changed considerably, going from blank to becoming a showcase for many different forms of art. By art I mean different forms of imagery, ranging from illustrations to graphical design

that has been printed upon the T-shirt. The analysis of T-shirt designs will be exclusively on designs that have been found in the popular online community of Threadless.com. T-shirt designs that include words have been excluded in that this research will be focused on illustrative design. This is an investigation into non-verbal and non-written communication. In order to discover how communication is produced through imagery on the T-shirt, emphasis has been put on semiological accounts of meaning including the clarification of the terms signifier and signified. This section will also go through the notion of connotation and denotation and reveal how these play an important role in a T-shirt design.

Just as it has seen in modernist works, the new era of T-shirt designs use art/design to discretely show a deeper meaning. By using a medium and method that does not openly say to its observer “something is being said here”, design on T-shirts reveal ideologies and desires by the use of “scopophilia”, “the pleasure gained from looking” (Barnard, 70). Human beings understand messages through design by interpreting the imagery that is used. In his book *Introduction to Two-Dimensional Design: Understanding form and Function* John Bowers speaks of production of meaningful forms. He attests that before creating a form that could give meaning we must “understand the ways and implications of sending, receiving, and interpreting messages”. (Bowers, 89) When pointing to the discussion of communication design he confirms the fact that messages can have several layers of meaning. These layers of meaning could lead to both clarity and ambiguity; luckily, there are elements within design that assist the observer in the complex process of reading messages through imagery. Bowers claims; “particularly when clarity is desired, visual guides in the form of signals and cues become useful components to guiding interpretation and understanding function”. (Bowers, 90) This statement introduces us to the idea of the signifier and signified.

The concept of the signifier and the signified demonstrates the role of the T-shirt in correlation to its design and also the designs role in correlation to its meaning.

“(...) human communication involves the use of one thing to stand for or represent something else. (...) Human communication, then, involves signs (...) Signifiers are the physical part of signs, they are the sounds or the shapes of words. The signified is the mental concept to which that signifier refers. It is the meaning of the signifier.” (Barnard, 81)

Communication through T-shirt design is in this sense gained from either the T-shirt or its design being that “one thing” that stands for “or represents something else”. With the T-shirt, that “something else” that is being represented could be anything from a sheet of paper through which communication is made possible to a painting on which art has been produced. The body, then, becomes a symbol for the book on which the pages (symbolized by the T-shirt) are attached and instead of the words we see the design. Figure 1 presents a design of what seems to be a keyhole through which other visual objects are floating out. What this design is representative of could be a keyhole to the lusts of the wearer’s heart. The heart is clearly not seen, it is only represented through the placement of the keyhole. The objects’ that are looming out of the hole stand for feelings since their signifier, the graphics, are illustrating different forms of musical performances that could hint to the musical interest of the wearer. These are also signified through the signifiers form and placement. While the T-shirt is representing a form of canvas on which communication is being performed, the keyhole and the other components in its design are representing what is behind the T-shirt, parts that are not seen. It is the perception of the spectator that decides what the signifier is signifying.



FIG. 1. "MISSION LISTEN" BY ROMANTIC WALRUS. TAKEN FROM WWW.THREADLESS.COM

As it was mentioned in the introductory section of this paper, the efficiency of the transmission process is extremely important. If the design is unclear or the signified is not recognized by the receiver, a part of the communication process may be lost. Thus, design constitutes a vital factor in the sending and receiving of messages. Without an identifiable and well thought out design, communication through a T-shirt becomes more difficult to accomplish. Nonetheless, one could argue that communication occurs no matter the standard of the design, since all designs say something fundamental and true about their creators. No matter what the case is, design proves itself to be an efficient system through which communicating on T-shirts can be perceived. In his section of "Fashion, Clothing and Meaning" in *Fashion as Communication* Barnard uses an image of a gentleman wearing "a jacket and some form of short trousers" to explain how the signifier and the signified work on "a number of different levels". (Barnard, 82) He says,

"First, various lines, shapes and patterns may be recognized as representing part of the jacket. Some shapes are recognized as standing for lapels, pockets, buttons, pleats and a belt, for example. They are not those parts of a jacket but they represent them. Second, the lines, shapes and patterns which go to form lapels, pockets,

buttons, pleats and belt may be recognized as representing a particular style of jacket and trousers. In this case, the signified of those particular lines, shapes and patterns is a Norfolk jacket, worn with knickerbockers. Third, the jacket, or indeed the whole ensemble, may be considered as a signifier. The outfit itself may be understood as standing for a whole way of life.” (Barnard, 83-84)

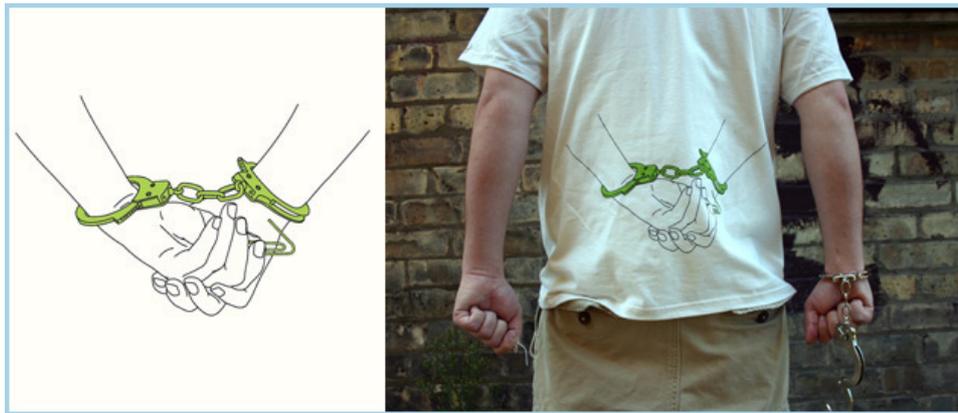


FIG. 2: “SMOOTH CRIMINAL” BY DAN SHEFFIELD. TAKEN FROM WWW.THREADLESS.COM

One could apply the same description to the T-shirt design in figure 2. The forms and lines that have been drawn by the designer may be referred to as the signifiers in that they represent the handcuffed hands of the wearer. The hands and handcuffs in this case become the signified. By observing the signifying lines we comprehend what the signified is and we understand that they are not actual hands but a representation of them. Similarly, as in Barnard’s second point, the lines and shapes that have formed the detained hands may signify a certain type of hands that might be of importance to the meaning of the design. Noteworthy features of the arrested hands would in this case be the skin tone of the hands and the color of the handcuffs. The skin tone might reveal the ethnicity of the designer while the green color of the handcuffs could be associated with the color of money and greed and in its turn imply that the hands are breaking free from a money-driven system. Lastly, the colors used in the design of the T-shirt, the action and placement of the hands are all signifiers that could

represent “a whole way of life” according to Barnard’s analysis. Through the signifier and the signified T-shirt designs signal important information to their observers and give them hints to what is being communicated in an image.

Denotation and connotation are another way of approaching meaning that is received through imagery. The process of meaning making can be divided into these two concepts in order to make it easier for observers to understand how design is “read”. Denotation is the literal meaning of a word or an image. The actual and precise meaning of what an image on a T-shirt is signifying. Fiske suggest this to be the “common-sense, obvious meaning” of an image. We perceive the keyhole in figure 1 to be exactly what it is signifying. The obvious meaning of what we perceive in figure 1, then, is a keyhole, normally attached to a door of some kind. “The denotative meaning of an image, drawing, painting or photograph, is what the image is an image of”. (Barnard, 84) Most people would agree that the denotative meaning of an image is perceived quite alike amongst people. In a room of 50 people, most would agree that what they see in figure 1 is a keyhole. Of course, in design, the denotative meaning is not always clear since one can encounter imagery that one is not familiar with. For instance the various musical objects that are coming out of the keyhole are quite hard to recognize in a denotative sense. Although it is not difficult to tell that they are musical activities, balancing on a swirling rainbow and exercised with the help of clouds, there is no word for the denotative meaning of what is flowing out through the keyhole. This is specifically the reason to why design should and is seen as a form of art. Through art we distinguish the connotative meaning of what we see and can therefore calm our senses by understanding objects or images through our interpretation of them. Connotation is what our minds relate the design we see with. It does not have to be the correct or exact meaning of an image given that connotative meaning depends greatly on ones own experience and previous

associations. “Connotation (...) may be described as the thing that a word or an image makes a person think or feel, or as the association that a word or an image has for someone. (...) images will have different associations, or connotations, for different people because those people are different”. (Barnard, 85) This is an ideal example of how the public associates diverse thoughts and feelings to different sorts of images. It is because of this that one can never be sure what the observer thinks of a T-shirt design. However, one can affect the thought process by having a well-thought-out connotative design that will lead the mind of the observer to the intended direction. For instance, figure 1 demonstrates a well-thought-out design in its choice of the signified. It can be argued that a keyhole is associated with inner thoughts and secrets. When using a symbolic object such as this in a design, the designer does indeed succeed to trigger the connotative meaning of it. Looking through a keyhole one could discover hidden truths or in this case maybe even hidden dreams. The dreams, signified by the clouds, come through the door to our soul, signified by the heart which in its turn was signified by the placement of the keyhole. By having the power of the connotative understanding of a design, it is important for both the designer of the T-shirt and wearer of the T-shirt to use this ability to influence people in the right way and maybe even make a change in society.

Communication studies and the T-shirt

While the previous discussion on T-shirt designs in itself clarified ways in which images communicate, there is still a need for further investigating the non-verbal aspect of communication through T-shirts. Communication comes in diverse forms. T-shirts recently became one of these forms. We need to address this new phenomenon in order to see how it succeeds to send messages to its observers.

Communication is a quite complicated system of sending and receiving messages. Karl Erik Rosengren has approached this complex subject. In his book *Communication: An Introduction* he addresses the use of symbolic/iconic language. He claims that man's first attempts to articulate meaning included the use of signals and icons made out of "gestures, facial expressions, grunts and cries" and that these subsequently led to the more advanced use of language including verbal symbols building on "words and simple sentences based on double articulation" (Rosengren, 38). He also suggests that this was a crucial time since it was at this time that human beings transformed their system of communication from "primitive code" largely built on "icons, signals and indices" to a fully developed language. What is important to address here is the fact that human communication seems to have gone from having codes and signs as primary use for communicating to developing more advanced forms of expression to once again turning to the use of codes and symbols. These symbolic ways of communication can be seen anywhere today, from parking lot signs to toilet signs to T-shirt designs. Non-verbal communication, then, seems to have existed since the beginning of mankind and still today, it is an important tool in interaction between people. Rosengren writes of the oldest form of non-verbal communication being the bodily language, including emotions, feelings and different moods and suggest that these "formed an important part in the genesis of human language" (Rosengren, 39). This implication, that human gestures would have an important role in the development of human language could be correlated to the importance that verbal communication has had for the development of the symbolic language. According to Rosengren, the purpose of small statues of animals and humans found around 30.000 year ago may have been "decorative, expressive or magical". He then argues, "(...) in order to fulfil these functions, they must first have fulfilled the representative function. They must have been communicating some important meaning" (Rosengren, 40).

Meaning of an image is associated with the verbal and written label applied to the object that is being represented in that image. The design of a T-shirt must have some sort of representational foundation in order to make sense. It can either be a representation of something that has been seen by the spectator in his or her own culture or a representation of words used to describe what is being seen. Rosengren states,

Very early the most important signs were reproduced in one form or the other: carved into wood, bone or stone; drawn with charcoal on whatever suitable material was at hand; pressed into clay. Out of direct communication, mediated communication was thus emerging from early on. This meant that an articulate 'external memory' was being created among humankind. (Rosengren, 41)

In this way, our direct communication (speech) has led to mediated communication (design) and the "material at hand" in this case is the T-shirt.

In *Communication: An Introduction*, Rosengren quotes Professor Roger Brown in his attempt to address the question of non-verbal communication and its relation to verbal communication. Brown means that it would be a mistake to suggest that non-verbal communication is more informative than verbal communication. He argues that language is "a universal medium able to express anything that can be thought or felt". Nevertheless, he continues by speaking in favor of the non-verbal channel and its ability to "have a special relationship with affect or feeling, because they are likely to 'leak' information deliberately concealed in the controllable verbal channel" (qtd in Rosengren, 39). One should not contemplate too much on which channel to appoint as most informative. Both the verbal and the non-verbal channel are informative in their own respect. One can say that we create meaning through collaboration between the two. Non-verbal communication has become a

universal language as well and it could surely be argued that it is able to express anything that is “thought or felt”. Conversely, verbal communication is a powerful source of information.

Rosengren explains that

Human speech is produced by the brain. It alone is capable of using the symbolic functions, by which we interpret signals from our surroundings, analyze them in spatial, temporal, casual and finalistic (intentional) terms, and evaluate them in moral and aesthetic terms of good and bad, beautiful and ugly, thus producing meaning.

(Rosengren, 33)

Despite the obvious significance of verbal communication, the role of non-verbal communication has grown stronger and this is the reason to why it is considered necessary to be emphasized in this section.

Without any attempt to suggest that non-verbal communication is superior to verbal communication it has to be pointed out that it does in fact reveal information that could be concealed through the verbal channel. Taking into consideration that people meet on daily basis, a T-shirt and its design reflect many “truths” that would otherwise have been “hidden”. Despite the fact that human beings interact with each other almost every day, it is not likely that they would approach every other person they meet on the street. When wearing a piece of apparel, one would not be obliged to speak to another person in order to communicate. The body is on display and its external surface is a silent speech. When having a dialogue with one another, many of us are aware of cultural codes. These codes tell us how to behave in the public and thus “filter” our sentences. In a western society where people are frequently expressing themselves and have the right to oppose other ideologies than their own, the issue of what one can say and what one cannot say can sometimes still be an issue. Without having

to explain anything to others, one can express oneself exclusive of limitations. T-shirt design involves no “censoring” of words or thoughts. Of course, actual words are not used on the design of this discussion; however this is another factor which enhances “leaking” information of T-shirt designs. As it has been discussed previously, the denotative meaning of a T-shirt design is not always easy to identify. This feature allows for diverse interpretations of what is on display and since art cannot be judged it cannot be silenced. In 2004, Medford school teachers were thrown out of the President Bush rally at the Jackson County Fairgrounds. They had chosen to wear T-shirts with the words “protect our civil rights” printed on them. The utterance of the T-shirts were obviously too disruptive to be worn at the event. One of the teachers, Janet Voorhies, commented that she only wore the T-shirt because she wanted to see if she could make a statement that she felt was important but not offensive. She meant that they only wanted to bring a message to President Bush without any intention of protesting.¹ Essentially, the three teachers’ goal was to communicate with President Bush through T-shirts with written design. Although their intention was not to create uproar, the written exclamation was perceived too aggravating and therefore not accepted. By using a different design, not including words, the three teachers might have succeeded to communicate with the President on a connotative level and the possibility of being escorted out would have been minimal. Leaving this matter aside, one should not forget that the T-shirt as a medium communicates its own role in the world. No utterance is necessary in order to inform people around us that a T-shirt is not solely a piece of garment. By only observing the world, spectators and passers-by see change in the social order.

The first of Fiske’s two schools of communication have shown that it is the sending and receiving of messages that form communication. His analysis also showed that the T-shirt

¹ Kgw.com and AP staff, “Teachers’ T-Shirts Bring Bush Speech Ouster,” Commondreams Newscenter, 15 October 2004 <<http://www.commondreams.org/headlines04/1015-06.htm>>

is the medium through which messages are sent back and forward between a sender and a receiver. If one would look at this from Marshall McLuhan's standpoint, it would be argued that the medium is the message. To apply this view on the T-shirt from a cultural position, it could certainly be the message. It could also be argued that it is the design or the tool creating the design on the T-shirt that is the medium since the message which is received by the spectator is placed on the T-shirt. Mark Federman, who has dedicated his time to explain what McLuhan meant by his statement "the medium is the message" claims,

McLuhan defines medium for us (...) he tells us that a medium is "any extension of ourselves." Classically, he suggests that a hammer extends our arm and that the wheel extends our legs and feet. Each enables us to do more than our bodies could do on their own. Similarly, the medium of language extends our thoughts from within our mind out to others. (Federman, 2004)

Design found on T-shirts is the outcome of a designer's thought and values. These thoughts and values are being communicated through the imagery and are therefore the language of their creator. T-shirt and its design, then, both fit to the definition of what a medium is according to McLuhan. The T-shirt is an extension of our bodies on which we put our thoughts; the design. The design in its turn is the non-verbal language of its producer. It becomes questionable then, what the role the body has in this process. On one account the body could be part of the medium, forming a clothes medium through which messages are delivered. Yet, it can not be overlooked that the T-shirt and the human body are detached. Without the body, the T-shirt will stand alone and not able to make itself public to the same extent. The medium does not stand alone in its communicative function. On this account Federman states,

McLuhan warns us that we are often distracted by the content of a medium (which, in almost all cases, is another distinct medium in itself.) He writes, "it is only too typical that the "content" of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium." (McLuhan 9)

And it is the character of the medium that is its potency or effect - its message." (Federman, 2004)

The medium then should not be judged by its internal and external components. The T-shirt and its design are both media in themselves. They should be, as demonstrated in this paper, studies separately. By distracting oneself with the communicative feature of T-shirt designs, one could think that it is only the design which uses non-verbal communicates to bring meaning to the spectator of a T-shirt. The importance of the T-shirt itself as a communicative tool is therefore just as vital as the importance of its design.

Conclusion

Similar to the way people might find clothing as an unnecessary subject of study they might suggest that clothing has no real connection to culture. Barnard describes this position of thinking in *Fashion as Communication*, saying that some people might judge clothing to be too trivial or unimportant to be considered as cultural phenomena. He continues saying that "on this view of culture, it would be only too easy to rule out fashion and adornment as culture on the grounds that they are hardly intellectual or imaginative works which illuminate the dark recess of human conditions" (Barnard, 35). This assumption about clothing was invalidated in the previous sections of this paper as it was made clear that designers of clothing can create productions that are imaginative, able to stimulate the human mind and also "lead" the human mind to think in a certain path. The argument in Barnard's quotation above is that clothing is not art and can therefore not be counted as "the highest and most

refined products of the human mind” (Barnard, 36). Barnard manages to address this incorrect approach to clothing by referring to the name of Herder. He means that Herder believed that the conception of culture was deceptive in that it was “(...) implied that culture was the same sort of thing, consisting in the same sort of activities and to be judged by the same sort of standards” in all nations and periods of time (Barnard, 36). Herder meant that the conception of culture is multilinear and that takes the example of Europe in the end of the eighteenth century when it thought itself to be the end point of culture. He therefore argued that eighteenth century Europe thought itself to be “in a position to judge all other cultures in terms of its own standard” (Barnard, 36). This sort of judgment should be dismissed in this time of age. For it should be clear by now that nothing is constant. Just as we develop as a population, our conception of culture should evolve with it. To imply that culture is complete is to say that time is standing still. Not many would have guessed the T-shirt to have been a communicative form of art in the early 20th century. Today designers are taking advantage of its materiality in order to express themselves. The art of graphical design has taken a leap from the computer onto the bodies of the members of our community. The wearers of T-shirts have received the opportunity of marking their individuality by simply having a choice in their way of dressing. Spectators read change in culture by being approached with T-shirts that portray individuality and ideologies through design. It is without a doubt a mistake to set standards for what culture is without extending them as time goes by. One cannot judge art, or any other creation of man, based only on set values of other periods of time. The T-shirt reveals the identity of its wearer, creator, spectator and culture through visual design and materiality of the body. The studying of the T-shirt as a cultural phenomenon can therefore not be seen as unnecessary or be disregarded.

Everyday we encounter individuals from our community and build our opinion about them based on how they present themselves to us. The outward appearance of the individuals we meet has an important effect on how we see them as persons. The personality of each and every person is reflected through their choices of clothes and it is precisely what we judge people by. It cannot be disregarded that we all at some point have questioned the clothes of someone else. The meaning of the phrase “what was s/he thinking” suddenly becomes more apparent. A person might have been thinking of protection of his or her body, caring less about the visual function of his or her clothing. Another might wear minimal amounts of clothing in the winter time, not paying too much attention to the well-being of his or her body. Human beings are different in their ways of thinking. What the T-shirt does is to bring out our thoughts and make them public to other individuals. Barnard speaks of social relations reminds us that,

Every day we make decisions about the social status and role of the people we meet based on what they are wearing: we treat their clothes as ‘social hieroglyphics’ (...) which conceal, even as they communicate, the social position of the wearer. Fashion and clothing, that is, may be the most significant ways in which social relations between people are constructed, experienced and understood. (Barnard, 9)

Without being “required” to dress in extraordinary ways and without having to express oneself verbally to show one's stand point in one's culture, the T-shirt displays both social roles of wearers and creators involved in its existence and has a range of other important functions just as any other form of clothing. The T-shirt also creates the cultural reality which it portrays in its designs. As discussed earlier, the change of function of any form

of human production demonstrates a change in cultural standards and ways of thought in its community. With its new function as a communicative device, the T-shirt has stirred design and communication studies into a new direction. Designers, wearers and spectators of the T-shirt help to empower this new cultural phenomenon while simultaneously living what they produce. As the function of the T-shirt changes in juxtaposition to changes in culture, the design of the T-shirt alters depending on social and political changes. A designer's impression of the world changes as he or she experiences events that might change his or her stand point and as a result make a shift his or her work.

The allegory of the cave proves that what the prisoners saw on the cave walls were only a representation of what was really taking place behind them. The reflections of our communities are mediated as the shadows upon the walls of Plato's narrative, except, the "shadows" of our societies are the performances and innovations of humans that are seen on various forms of media. The walls of the cave are how we perceive T-shirt designs internally in our culture. What we see is on T-shirt designs are reflections of our reality. If the prisoners would to turn their heads, they would discover the true character of the shadows coming from outside the cave. As observers of the T-shirt we can similarly "turn our heads" and see the performances made from outside that influence what we see on the inside. This means that we can, through the analysis of a T-shirt, see what is being portrayed on our wall (the T-shirt) with our "shadows" (the design of the T-shirt) and evidently what we would find would be ourselves. If we are the creators and truth behind our own shadows, then we should use it to our advantage to create meaningful reflections which "prisoners of the society" will look upon. These reflections could give information that could at some point turn the heads of their observers which in their turn would

understand their own importance and use their innovations in order to inform and make a change in society.

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