

## Fairey's Hope

Fairey, Shepard. *Barack Hussein Obama*, 2008. 69 x 45.5 inches. National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC. <http://obeygiant.com/headlines/obama-hope>. Accessed 3 January 2011.

Faced with the challenge of teaching Roland Barthes' essay "Myth Today" to a lecture hall of undergraduate art and design students, I sought a contemporary image that would engage my audience members through its relevance to their time. The iconic Obama campaign poster, designed by culture-jamming artist Shepard Fairey, proved an apt choice. A bold portrait of Barack Obama is paired with the single word "HOPE," which appears in large capital letters. Obama gazes heavenward. The primary colors of the American flag lend the image a stark, purposeful intent. Together with my students, we analyzed the image using semiotic theories to consider how this image became the iconic signifier for Obama's campaign, and how it functions within Barthes' definition of "myth."<sup>i</sup>

After the election, controversy sparked around the poster due to allegations that the source of the Obama portrait was an Associated Press (AP) photograph by Mannie Garcia. AP claimed copyright infringement, and Fairey claimed fair use. Fairey's attorneys later dropped the case when they discovered that Fairey had fabricated much of the evidence he had provided to them disputing the source of his imagery. But prior to the election, the poster succeeded in tightly connecting the idea of "hope" to then-candidate Obama. The image spread virally and was re-created on t-shirts, pins, and every other imaginable form of campaign paraphernalia. Its influence was even seen later in campaign images promoting British Prime Minister David Cameron, which visually alluded to the Fairey poster.

How can we account for the poster's success? How do the poster's visual signifiers coalesce into an image that would help secure more than 50% of the popular vote? Why did the notion of "hope," coupled with this particular presidential candidate, become so germane to the 2008 presidential campaign? And, how does the poster either rely upon, or distance itself from, notions of racial difference? That is, to what extent is Obama's racial identity central to the poster's claim that this person offers the best hope for the nation's future?

As my students and I explored these questions, we began to uncover how "hope" is communicated not only linguistically through the use of the word itself, but visually as well in complex ways that position Barack Obama as being different from previous candidates, yet at the same time, not being *too* different. The poster's iconography, we concluded, draws on varied and contradictory historical signifiers of "hope."

On the one hand, the upward gaze relies on a Christian art historical trope where a glance to the skies indicates that the subject looks to divine sources for strength and optimism. The gaze thus positions Obama as Christian, and as a candidate who will continue the tradition of American presidential belief in God (is it even possible to imagine an atheistic American president?). Though the candidate's difference—his self-identification as an African American—is legible in his features in this portrait, not only his upward gaze but his serious demeanor, and, as my students noted, his suit and tie, connote his conventionality as a political leader.

On the other hand, Fairey's formal choices—the use of primary colors, particularly bright fire-engine red; the bold, sans-serif typography; the reliance on flat shapes—are all reminiscent of diverse propaganda associated with threats to American nationhood. Fairey himself acknowledges the strong influence on his work of sources such as Russian Constructivist posters, the iconic image of Che Guevara, and the propaganda of the Chinese cultural revolution (Fairey 90). Throughout his oeuvre, Fairey borrows from the visual language of these political predecessors—the areas of solid color typical of the silkscreen process, portraiture simplified to its most basic elements, a palette of red and black color with minimal additional colors, and other stylistic tropes. These he combines with his own additions, such as incorporating textures into the color planes (as was done in the original “Hope” collage upon which the screen-printed poster was based), to create a style that is once derivative and iconically his own.<sup>ii</sup> Such aesthetics appear in Fairey's depictions of a range of twentieth-century political figures including Che, Mao, Stalin, Lenin, Bobby Seale, and Richard Nixon. “Merely through presentation that mimics a style,” Fairey writes, “people assume something is what it is not” (126). Fairey is less interested in Marxism, Stalinism, Black Panthers, or Republican presidents than he is in how visual signifiers confer power on an individual. By depicting this disparate list of individuals using the visual language of revolution, all of these figures appear to be revolutionary. If he trains his lens in the Obama poster on “what [Obama] is not,” what comes into focus is a candidate who, though he may seem to be racially unlike his predecessors, is *not* unlike previously elected American presidents.<sup>iii</sup> Like Woodrow Wilson, Obama was a university professor, and like Jack Kennedy, Obama was a best-selling author. And, as with all U.S. presidents who preceded him, he is male, a notable point given that his most serious contender during the primary election was a woman. Yet despite these expected attributes, this candidate's race is certainly not insignificant. Through “presentation that mimics a style,” Fairey's poster posits a figure who will have the potential to heal the greatest scar in American history—the fact of black slavery.

In the initial run of the poster, Fairey paired his portrait with the word “progress” but later changed the text to “hope.”<sup>iv</sup> “Progress” would have indicated the next step forward in American history through the election of an African American president.<sup>v</sup> Hope implies an open-ended future. A less teleological concept than progress, hope can be read as *either* a statement about what makes this candidate different from previous American

presidents, and his potential to move the nation beyond its racism, or a more generalized hope that could appeal to those who claim a “post-racial” present, those who stated that they voted for Obama for reasons other than his race.

In these ways, Fairey’s poster has something for everyone: patriotism can be located in its red, white, and blue color scheme while revolutionary politics are alluded to in its formal references; the portrait depicts a candidate who is black enough for some but not too black for others, etc. Hence the poster’s broad appeal. It suggests hope for a better future, galvanizing all those who find the present to be troubled. The poster appeals to viewers who wish to imagine this non-white presidential candidate as an “un-raced” figure, allowing such viewers to envision Obama as president *despite* his race. But the poster also offers the hope that electing our first African American president will right the wrongs of the nation’s past—both distant and recent. By vacating these histories of their details “myth transforms history into nature,” writes Barthes, and in so doing “abolishes the complexity of human acts” and “establishes a blissful clarity” (Barthes 143). As my students and I uncovered, the poster offers an optimistic future uncomplicated by systemic historical and contemporary American racism. The hope Fairey’s poster offers is that if we vote for this candidate, our future will be, inevitably, devoid of racism. A lofty hope, to be sure.

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<sup>i</sup> A Barthesian myth operates at the second level of signification; that is, the elements of the first sign combine to form a signifier for a new, ideological sign. Many thanks to the students of my California College of the Arts “Foundations in Critical Studies” course of Fall 2009, in particular Jesea Merton, for the dialogue that led to this piece. Thanks as well to incisive comments on this review from Paula Birnbaum, Alla Efimova, Jackie Francis, David Gissen, and Tirza Latimer.

<sup>ii</sup> In January 2009, the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. purchase one of the original collages for its collection of portraits of American presidents. See David Itzkoff, “National Portrait Gallery Gets Obama Poster,” *New York Times* January 7, 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> Additionally, Obama is quite possibly not the first bi-racial president; so, in this way he is not entirely racially unlike his predecessors. For the purposes of this review, I stay with Barack Obama’s self-identification as an African American. I do this in part to acknowledge that self-identification is my preferred method, but also to avoid being mired in debates about “how black” Obama might be. Yet, it is worth noting that the colors of the Fairey poster do serve to abstract race in the portrait. Thanks to Jackie Francis and Tirza Latimer for raising these points.

<sup>iv</sup> The change was made at the request of the Obama campaign.

<sup>v</sup> “Progress” might also have connected the candidate too closely with “progressivism,” an idea historically associated with liberalism in the United States. Hope leaves more room for conservatives to envision themselves with Obama’s future.

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## Works Cited

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