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### **When Art Attacks**

*“A wall is just as good a place to publish as anywhere else.” - Banksy*

Art, in all its instances, is considered to be the most basic form of self-expression. These expressions vary from basic smiley faces drawn by a five year old to universally and historically recognized masterpieces. Like the dreams in the Freudian theory, works of art fulfill a repressed wish that stems from the depths of the unconscious mind, perhaps even stemming from a conflict from within. More often than not, the work of art is the outcome of an emotional, social, and/or political conflict within the realm of society. Hence, sometimes, several works of art appear as a form of revolt against the laws and politics of a society. Moreover, those works of art may serve as crucial evidence to an underlying class struggle; to a society that is capitalist and exploitative of those who are of lower class. An example to such a form is street art which is embodied in graffiti, guerilla, and stencil art. It is considered an urban art form where the canvas is the street. This type of art is mostly illicit, illegal, as it targets and vandalizes governmental public places, but, above all, expressive. More importantly, it is drawn by those whose voices are muffled due to class conflicts, thus they turn to using words, shapes, and colors to communicate symbolically, politically and artistically to an audience. “The emotional power of a work of art – focused, perhaps, on some non-social feature of a landscape – may depend on an underlying conflict in society which is never explicitly referred to; and to which can be recovered only by interpretive

analysis backed up by explicit social theory.” (Jackson 117) Perhaps one of the most prominent guerilla street artists is Banksy, whose daring and creative works of art have earned him international recognition. The reason behind Banksy’s worldwide fame lies in the fact that he creates a social, political, and a somewhat revolutionary stance against monarchy and capitalism.

"I started off painting graffiti in the classic New York style you use when you listen to too much hip hop as a kid. But I was never very good at it. As soon as I cut my first stencil, I could feel the power there. The ruthlessness and efficiency of it is perfect. I also like the political edge. All graffiti is low-level dissent but stencils have an extra history. They've been used to start revolutions and to stop wars. They look political just through the style. Even a picture of a rabbit playing a piano looks hard as a stencil." (Banksy Qtd. in Manco par. 2)

His works are political in nature exuding anti-war, anti-capitalist, anti-establishment, and pro-freedom sentiment. In other words, his concepts and slogans convey a strong Marxist message against society.

Banksy, often described as an “art terrorist”, “guerilla artist”, and a “prankster”, leaves his true identity anonymous. No one really knows who he is. He is allegedly born in Bristol in 1974. His real name is said to be either Robert Banks or Robin Banks. (Vallely par. 26) “He has no formal art education . . . he'd started spraying graffiti when he was an unhappy 14-year-old schoolboy. He was expelled from school and has reportedly served time in detention for petty crime . . .” (Chaundy par.8-9) His “tongue-in-cheek” art tell the story which the bald details of his biography hide. Coming from Bristol, which Bob Chaundy describes as “the cultural melting-pot of a port where graffiti art has a long heritage” (par.6), shows his struggling class background. On the whole, it is safe to assume that Banksy is a proletariat who is subjected

under the influence of his society. His rebellious streak against both his school and the police, which Louis Althusser consecutively calls the Ideological State Apparatuses and the Repressive State Apparatuses, only shows his resistance against capitalist oppression. These apparatuses inflict what Althusser calls Interpellation, which like Karl Marx's false consciousness, is "the process through which individuals are formed as subjects by powerful forces working in the interest of the prevailing ideology of a given society. . . This process of interpellation allows the existing power structure of capitalist society to maintain its domination over the general population without resorting to violence or force." (Booker 82) Banksy went against those apparatuses even going as far as drawing policemen in his stencils as a statement and a comment against capitalism.

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukacs stated that "capitalism has created a form for the state and a system of law corresponding to its needs and harmonizing with its own structure." (Qtd. in Blunden par. 2:6) In a capitalist society, police or law forces are meant to enforce the law; a law that works for the benefit of the ruling class. Ideologically speaking, policemen are there to ensure the safety of others by enforcing the law; however, this is not always the case, as the fate of every member of society is determined by a prevailing law that does not always bear in mind the conditions of the proletariat. Banksy mocks this system by depicting policemen in many of his drawings. Some of these drawings show two gay policemen kissing, a Queen's guard urinating on the wall, and another guard drawing the anarchist symbol, which is a circle with a capital "A" inside. "The Circle A is said to represent that "Anarchy is Order." (The "A" is for anarchy and the circle is either a symbol of order or represents the "O.") But the Circle A is also said to be a symbol of unity and determination, forwarding the anarchist ideals and the inevitable rebellion against the rulers." (Bylund par.2) Other drawings show a

policeman walking a groomed poodle with a red clown nose, marching soldiers with smiley faces, and a policeman doing a line of coke from the street, with the white line going through an alley and down a drain.

Banksy not only mocks the law enforcement system that works for the monarchy, but also mocks the monarchy itself. He drew Queen Victoria as a lesbian sitting on a woman's face, and drew Queen Elizabeth as a chimpanzee on her jubilee alongside pictures of royal guards with their trousers down. In a capitalist society, the monarchy shapes society using law as an instrument. Banksy believes in reshaping society by parodying the capitalist system. Perhaps one of the most outrageous parodies Banksy has ever done against the monarchy, in addition to his drawings, was printing a million pounds worth of "Diana" Ten Pound Notes on the seventh year anniversary of Princess Diana's death.

Banksy's Gallery of Re-mixed Masterpieces, Vandalism and Vermin is one of his most influential and moving exhibitions. Rats became Banksy's trademark as he seems to draw them everywhere. One finds those rats in various locations in different depictions, some include waiter rats, king rats, soldier rats, mortar rats, a rat on a primary school sign, paparazzi rat, welding rats, musical rats, parachuting rats, gangster rats, etc. Those rats are supposed to represent a classless society; a community that is unified using "abstract members of a species identical by definition with its other members" (Lukacs Qtd. in Blunden par. 1:22). However, this might be a depiction of Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony. In a hegemonous society, all men are forced to think the same by a dominant group. It makes them all rats. Those rats represent us, "suggesting perhaps that we sleep, eat, excrete and breathe our lives away in a similar state of ignorance and bliss" (Chua par. 3), thus showing man's blindness to the situation, to the fact that the majority of people see most of society's ideologies and structures as something that works for their own good, whereas in

reality, they serve the powerful party and a totalized system of control. Each of those rats are specialized and divided into a specialized mechanism of labor. This is perhaps Banksy's comment on violating people's humanity by specifying a specialization in work. Marx believes that "the individual is transformed into the automatic mechanism of a partial labor, and is thus crippled to the point of abnormality." (Qtd. in Lukacs Qtd. in Blunden par. 2:15) Moreover, Lukacs states that "the specialization of skills leads to the destruction of every image of the whole." (Qtd. in Blunden par. 3:1) Therefore, it was not a surprising matter to find live rats scurrying around Banksy's gallery while it lasted.

This portrayal of rats as laboring humans makes people more and more abstract devoiding them of their humanity. In other words, they are not human anymore, but "things"; they are reified. "Reification is the immediate reality of every person living in a capitalist society." (Lukacs Qtd. in Blunden par. 6:1) Moreover, through this process of reification, they are made to feel fragmented in the sense that their mechanical labor makes them objects of production. Man is "a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system" (Lukacs Qtd. in Blunden par. 1:15) One of Banksy's most significant rat stencils shows a rat with red paint saying "Because I'm worthless". Because of this division of labor, those rats feel alienated. "The division of labor leads to a separation between individuals who become distanced from each other by virtue of the differences in their everyday activities. Individuals become estranged from society as a whole because they participate only in a small portion of it as a result of their specialized work activities." (Booker 73) Not only that but also, as rats in a society ruled by humans, they are alienated and looked down upon, hence depicting a society ruled by class division where the bourgeoisie look down on the proletariats and the poor laboring workers.

Furthermore, Banksy also makes a commentary on commodification through his art. A commodity is an article produced and accordingly valued not for its “use value”, but for its “exchange value”. Lukacs states that in a capitalist society, “use-values cease to be use values, and become means of exchange, i.e. commodities.” (Qtd. in Blunden par. 1:3) By selling his artwork, Banksy becomes a commodifying rebellion. Selling his art only enforces his cynical view on modern consumerism. His works were bought by a number of celebrities, which form the new bourgeoisie. American pop star Christina Aguilera paid £25,000 for three of his works, one original and two prints, including a pornographic picture of Queen Victoria in a lesbian pose. (Beard par. 2) Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt reportedly paid \$391,000 for a Banksy canvas last year. (M.R. par. 2) Furthermore, a set of Kate Moss pictures have been sold in London for £50,400, setting an auction record for his work. “The six silk-screen prints, featuring the model painted in the style of Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe pictures, sold for five times its estimated value.” (BBC par. 2) He published four books on his art, *Existencilism*, *Banging Your Head Against a Brick Wall*, *Cut It Out*, and *Wall and Piece*. His “Diana” notes as well as his famous stencil rats are being sold on eBay to whoever bids the highest. Banksy responds to this frantic buying of his work by posting a painting on his website that featured an auctioneer presiding over a crowd of bidders, with the caption “I can’t believe you morons actually buy this shit.” (Collins par. 6) Art is not valued for its artistic value anymore, it is sold to the highest bidder, and Banksy makes sure he makes a mockery out of that.

This leads to Banksy’s parody of fetishism, which Lukacs dubs as the “specific problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism” (Qtd. in Blunden par. 1:2) Consumerism has become a modern day fetish. Products are not only valued for their exchange value but are now objects of an intense emotional attachment. One of Banksy’s drawings has a red “SALE ENDS TODAY”

sign with four religious women worshipping this sign. While in reality, those who are religious can achieve inner mastery over material ideals, this drawing reverses this idea. Sales have become an object of worship, hence enforcing a hierarchal ladder that instead of having God as the object of worship, it has material products at the very top. Other drawings include trolleys being speared by native hunters, and trolleys dumped in Monet's "Water Lily". Having those trolleys speared and hunted probably portrays markets and merchandise as objects of desire, or it might be the opposite whereby they must be conquered and killed. Banksy's version of the "Water Lily" is also a way of commenting against the consumerism of art to the point where buying and selling art has become a fetish that only turns art into a commodity. In addition, Banksy brings in his rats again to get this point across as he has a rat pointing at a Gap advertisement spraying the word "YUK" in red. The Gap is considered one of the most successful clothing shops with branches all over the world, as its market keeps growing, its demand keeps rising, and Banksy points out people's attachment to it by portraying the opposite. He also mocks the industrial system that controls people's lives by simply saying "YUK".

Moreover, Banksy pays attention to location. Location is very important when it comes to his paintings, for example, his cutting rats decked in working class outfits trying to break into something with welding machines are set across "15" Jamie Oliver's restaurant. Other locations include train stations, Parliament Square, South Bank, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Victoria Embankment, etc. He tends to have his paintings in front of social locations, where people would gather most, especially those with upper class status. He wants to get his point across; therefore, he makes sure it is.

In conclusion, Banksy is the embodiment of the proletarian revolution against the bourgeoisie. He answers Gramsci's call for a revolt against a dominant cultural hegemony. Using

an urban form of art, Banksy as proletariat, uses art as a creative substance rather than a commodity, and resumes art's powerful impact through a process of political and economic revolutionary pieces. Such a revolution would eliminate capitalism in all its forms. It would abolish alienation, commodification, and false ideologies, along with material evils like poverty, war, and class divisions. It would even abolish the division of labor as well. Gramsci hoped for a formation of intellectuals to overcome capitalism, Banksy hopes for a reformation of art to overcome capitalism, as his manifesto is about giving individuality to people through the use of color. Interpreting "Banksies" needs an open mind, one that goes deep into the piece and dissects its elements. Their political context is not always pleasant, but they strongly portray a struggle, a voice, and a cry out for a new dawn.

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