

# Slap: The Posters of Santiago Pol

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Figure 1

"Semana del INCIBA" [Institute of Culture and Belles Arts (INCIBA) Week], 1968.

The poster is a sign inserted in the complex semiotic systems that characterize contemporary cities. Aware of this fact, Santiago Pol designs his work considering both the paper and the context in which the poster will be placed. He researches the connections between forms, colors, and typography in graphic and urban spaces. Plus, he considers the guidelines given by the person creating the message, and analyzes the communicative effectiveness of every idea, as well as the possible environmental, emotional, and social circumstances of his audience. Pol collects the opinions and customs of the city. He views the creative process as a competitive risk, and pursues ideas to stir up passersby psyches; a complex task, since most people are bewildered by the saturation of icons along streets. Every graphic work that Santiago Pol creates comes from an observation process and intense study. Nevertheless, his graphic designs are a product of a creative praxis matured over a forty-year period. Therefore, when we look at the entirety of his posters, we find a coherent work of art with a unique condition that defines its existence as a delivered message.

Pol finished his first poster in 1968, called "Semana del INCIBA" [Institute of Culture and Belles Arts (INCIBA) Week] (Figure 1). Over the last few decades, he has created countless corporate and editorial designs. However, it is his work as poster designer that has given him a significant position inside and outside of Venezuela. Pol is the author of many logotypes, illustrations, and publications that the Venezuelan public remembers. Some of his remarkable pieces include the emblems of the National Election Council (*Consejo Nacional Electoral*) of Venezuela, and the Direction of Culture (*Dirección de Cultura*) of the Universidad Central de Venezuela; the sets of posters for the International Theater Festival of Caracas; the original system map for the Metro of Caracas (Caracas Subway System); and twenty popular Venezuelan stamps. A good portion of Pol's designs are well known at the international level, and some of his posters are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art of New York and the Louvre. Recently, he was asked to design one of the posters for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (Figure 2). Pol is an honorary member of Mexico City Biennial of Posters, and the Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI). Besides winning several prizes, he was the leading designer of Venezuela in the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005.



Central de Venezuela titled “The 1990s in 30” (Figure 3), in which Pol synthesizes the constructing and chromatic graphic elements of Roy Lichtenstein, Alexander Calder, and Andy Warhol.

### **A Visual Hound Dog: The Poster in Pol**

As an instrument for social communication, the poster lacks a unique style. Its effectiveness depends on a capability for surprising the audience. But because of the fierce visual competition found in urban environments, the poster has to constantly change its concepts and designing strategies to test, tenaciously, the aesthetic, communicative, and social tendencies of every artistic period. This process has turned the poster into a living language that has survived the arrival of all new communication technologies. It seems that the openness and the popularity of the poster have been the keys to its capability in adapting to several different trends, looks, and techniques. The same way it occurred with the painting before the nineteenth-century, the aesthetic value of the poster does not quarrel with its social purpose. The poster is intended to place readers—not spectators—in a referential context. It always is committed within a determined cultural, or political, discourse. The poster itself represents a social point of view, and nobody expects the poster to capture the personal views of his or her designer. None of us would have expected that Michelangelo would change the iconographic program of the Sistine Chapel to offer his intimate perspective of Christian doctrines. Very much aware of this, Santiago Pol gives precedence to the visual impact over the conceptual content in his posters. He knows that at a distance of seventy to one-hundred feet any piece of denotative information ceases to have any effect. For Pol, the few seconds that a human eye rests on a poster on a subway car, some wall, or column must be sufficient for attracting people’s interest. In summary, it can be said that Pol’s creative process is framed upon limitless and restless sensorial curiosity.

Pol often has addressed his personal style as one filled with a sort of “visual sense of smell,” something that makes possible knowing what is happening just by sniffing the air and identifying the clues to be represented graphically. In general, Pol’s way is a metaphor for the human being who is always enriched by the senses of smell, taste, touch, hearing, and sight. Pol’s style encloses a manner of expression that enhances instincts trained not to lose track of the footprints of shape, color, typography, and composition. He creates from the sensory experiences collected on the streets without excluding the aesthetic influences he carries with him and, additionally, the client’s needs. Pol has a graphic sensibility trained in the native land of memorable aromas, flavors, and landscapes. There is no abstraction of ideas when Pol starts the investigation leading to the creation of a poster. As a designer, he favors sensory, empirical, and direct knowledge, which is why he stays closely attached to ordinary people, thus making almost impossible any chance for discrimina-



Figure 3 (left)  
 "The 1990s in 30" for Universidad Central de Venezuela exhibit, 1990.

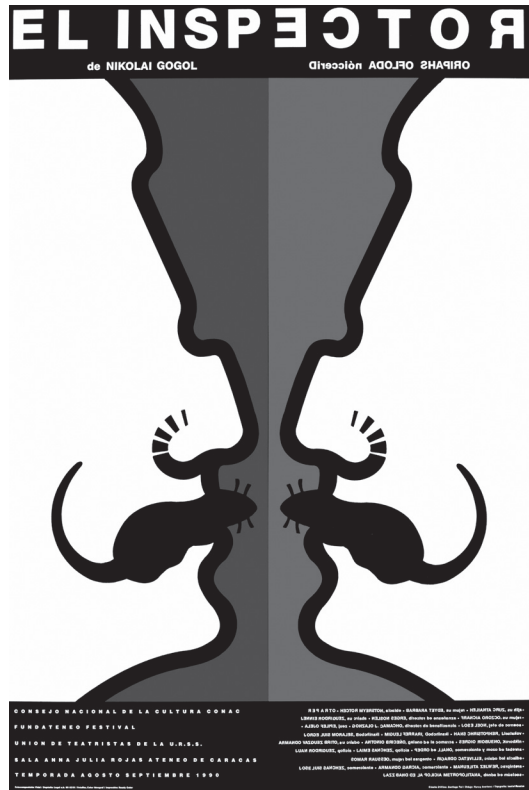


Figure 4 (right)  
 "El inspector es una rata" ("The Inspector Is a Rat Fink") a poster for a play by Nikolai Gogol, 1990.

tion. From this point of view, the discourse in his posters is intended for the masses that do not stop to think. And still his ultimate goal is to produce a commotion in each individual among the streams of people inundating the streets of contemporary cities.

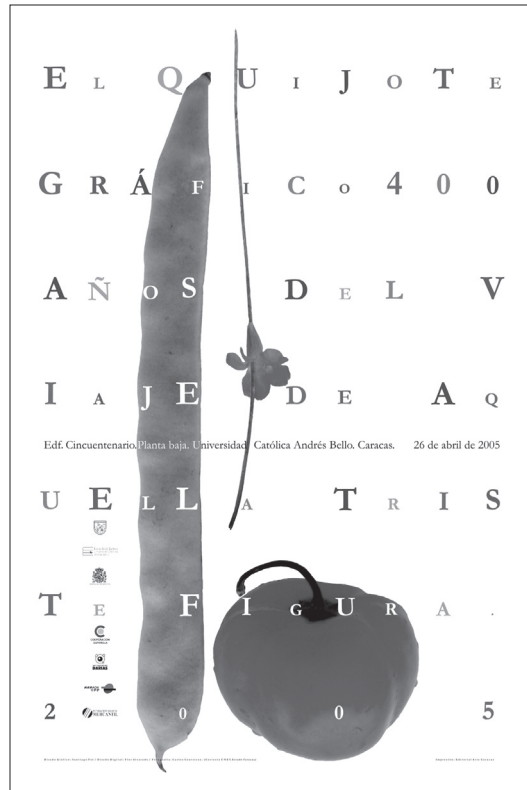
Bewilderment and remembrance are precisely the effects that Pol's work aims to achieve. He believes, as he has expounded in every conference and every interview, that the poster is like a thief who will take your house by surprise, and leave you wondering how he did it. In the same way, Pol argues that the image required to reach the masses must be "like a punch in the eyes so powerful that it bruises the brain."

As a communicator, Pol has felt obliged to pay attention to the voices of his surroundings before drawing even the first line of any new work. Pol's products do not begin inside him, but outside where noise, desires, and speed compete to reach a place in history. However, Pol's resulting creations leave out concessions, and always overflow the limits of information. Once the stumbling block of the "immediate effect" is surmounted, Pol's creation does not fade; on the contrary, it remains in time as an autonomous expression.

From his theoretical work as an educator and from his practice as a designing artist, Santiago Pol has researched color as a concept, as a cultural discourse, and as a carrier of emotions. He has built a personal iconography based on paradoxical and ambivalent objects; and based on the artistic sign considered as a structure open

Figure 5

"El Quijote es una vainita" poster for the eighteenth anniversary of the School of Cinema and Television.



to multiple meanings. Always from differing orientations, Pol has used diverse techniques such as photomontage, illustration, collage, sculpture, and digitalizing. He confronts his designs in the manner of a visual challenge not pleasing, but instead pushing the aesthetics. The referent of Pol's posters, objective or conceptual, is collective; he shares it with the majority of the people. This is due to the fact that Pol's works are based on cultural values rather than on individual ones. For example, if he creates a poster for a theatrical play, his idea for it will not start from a character, a starring actor or actress, or the director. Pol will take advantage of the conflicts presented in the plot, and he will build a graphic expression of the dramatic tensions. This allows him to set aside individual or temporal views. And like Bosch, Brueghel, and some other painters of the sixteenth century, Pol will emphasize idiomatic expressions and other popular lexical items. This way, he reaches the collective groups and offers an easily digestible discourse. Some good examples are offered in such posters as "The Inspector Is a Rat Fink" (*"El inspector es una rata"*) (Figure 4) to advertise a play by Nikolai Gogol; or "The Quixote Is a Peapod/Geezer" (*"El Quijote es una vainita"*) (Figure 5), which might be understood either as "Quixote is as thin as a peapod" or "Quixote is an eccentric and odd-looking guy," used for the exhibit "El Quijote Gráfico" or "This is a piece of cake" (the Venezuelan idiom *"Esto es un mango bajito"*) in the poster for the eighteenth anniversary



Figure 6

"El paquete" ("The Package") designed for a political party called *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement towards Socialism), 1989.



of the School of Cinema and Television. All of them are ideas that extend the posters' messages far beyond their mere role as a means of communication.

Pol has a graphic sensibility trained in Venezuela's own landscapes, aromas, and flavors. In addition to the educational background that he obtained during his school years, and the influences he admits in his work, he chases the image simmered on the sidewalks of Caracas, San Felipe, Maracaibo, and any of the cities in which he has lived. As in a gourmet dish, all of his posters require using condiments extracted from reality, but mixed without reducing or diluting their own essences. Pol's images are not strange or unknown to the real world, although his inherent syntax and rhetorical resources move these images close to fiction.

Both sensorial and conceptually, most people can see themselves in Pol's works because they speak of daily life, familiar ways, authentic landscape colors, and spontaneous emotions. Pol's posters never lead to absolute interpretations of the world: neither do they contain messianic stories nor prevailing voices; and they are not posters about political power. When he has chosen political subjects, he has preferred to listen to people's voices. His 1989 poster "The Package" ("*El paquete*") (Figure 6), designed for a political party called *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement towards Socialism), is a good example. The concept in this poster captures a popular slogan "*Nos estamos comiendo un cable*" (literally: "We are eating a cable"), which Venezuelan citizens use at the times when it is hard to buy basic goods given their high cost and the low salaries, and then a "bunch" (a package) of economic policies are put into effect by the government. As illustrated, Pol's referents are not those grouped under extraordinary histories or major conflicts of mankind. Rather, they are fragments of life grasped in the streets while walking along. Pol's images are realities transferred to self-explanatory aesthetic codes. For instance, the poster for the European Community film exhibit celebrated in Caracas, "*Euroscopio 2005*," left behind the glories, conflicts, conquests, and sorrows of the Old World, and avoided general explanations about European filming conditions at that moment. The Euroscopio 2005 poster turned around a 1€ (euro) bill, which then set up a connection between the exhibit and an object that is shared by all European citizens. The poster also paid homage—not to Bonaparte, or Julius Caesar, or Newton—but to Robert Kalina, the euro bill designer.

Santiago Pol's posters propose a semiotic game; a complex discursive space that takes to its limits the attributes of color, lines, textures, and frames, and, in fact, explores all the possibilities of the image. His posters are an open space for hesitations and whimsical impulses. How did that object get there? Why does Pol use all these graphic devices in such a particular fashion? Why is there such an intense chromaticism in the poster? Why are the figures grouped in such a manner? These are inquiries associated with the visual impact aimed at the first encounter of the eye with the image. Doubt is, in many cases, the automatic reaction of the surprised viewer looking at the poster. Then responses arrive once something similar to a visual digestion occurs, pondering over and over about the images seen.

Pol prefers to design ambiguous forms—fragmented and hybrid—intended for stimulating visual impact and emotional reactions. Icons and colors are the devices used for these purposes: otherwise, the viewer might turn his or her head, move on, and ignore the poster. This is the reason why Pol's shapes are both familiar and strange at the same time: they are impossible objects hanging on the walls of a possible physical world. They appear as deformed shapes screaming to people from their unconscious, appealing to their dreams and not to their reasoning.

Figure 7  
3rd Damascus International Film Festival,  
1983.



The audience of Pol's posters is approached without consent. An intimidated subject, shocked and astonished by the power of a palette full of harmonious contrasts, and also by forms ranging from hybrid to unbelievable ones: a magic carpet-shaped clap stick, (Figure 7), a fist-shaped man, a firecracker-shaped pencil, a spinning top-shaped book, or a paint brush with an electrical plug. Pol's ways of communicating are linked to snatching, to sudden screaming, and to powdering flashes. Contrary to the message function that McLuhan assigns to mass media, Pol's posters as medium represent a graphic slap. The communication is surprising, and the content is digested afterwards in every memory or in every new apparition. The recurrent encounters with its images in streets, subway stations, and bus stops contribute to dissipate initial doubts, and help to reinforce the message. However, the initial impression remains sealed in the viewer's psyche after the first encounter.