ALL POWER! VISUAL SEMIOTICS IN THE WORK OF EMORY DOUGLAS

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Resumen

From the mid-1960s until 1982, the Black Panther Party's artist Emory Douglas created images that helped to change visual communication as a discipline, and created an iconography of liberation that remains effective to this day. Douglas was the Party's Minister of Culture and the Black Panther newspaper's art director, designer and primary illustrator. After joining the party in 1967, Douglas was the most persistent graphic agitator in the American Black Power movement. This movement followed the civil rights movement that resulted in legislation guaranteeing basic rights for African Americans and ending official and institutionalized segregation in the United States.

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In a review of a new book on the Black Panthers called *Black Against Empire*, critic and journalist Mark Reynolds frames their impact in this way:

> For a few brief years, the Panthers were the most galvanizing force not only within black America, but also the progressive left. They emboldened young black men and women, energized white activists,

and enraged the government. What started as two community college students taking action against local police injustices became a national movement.[1]

To contextualize them in contemporary American life, he goes on to say, "They both shaped and were shaped by the prevailing political and cultural zeitgeists, and etched themselves firmly into our cultural memory and imagination."[2]

As Jane Rhodes wrote in her introduction to the book *Framing the Black Panthers*, "The passage of time has not eroded the strength of their symbols and rhetoric—the gun, the snarling panther, the raised fist, and slogans such as 'All power to the people' and 'Off the pig.'"[3] The Black Panthers are now icons of American culture—to some they were heroes, representing aggressive pursuit of black liberation. Others think of them the way the Federal Bureau of Investigation did in 1970, calling them the country's "most dangerous and violence prone of all extremist groups."[4] Often the Panthers are called black nationalists, an ideology insisting that only a separate agenda created by and for black Americans would solve racial inequality and oppression. Over time Huey Newton, the co-founder with Bobby Seale of the Black Panther party "transformed his thinking from black nationalism to revolutionary nationalism, which meant nationalism and socialism."[5] He believed this ideology could build a worldwide coalition that included people of all races who shared their beliefs and dedication to fighting oppression at all levels.

The primary goal of the Black Panther Party was to fight oppression. They were allied with black nationalists early on because of their concentration on improving conditions for black people in black communities. At that time, in black neighborhoods—also then called ghettos—across the country, black people were routinely harassed and brutalized by the police. Police techniques included routine frisking of people on the street, beatings, and an unusually high incidence of suspects being shot on the streets. For example:

Between January 1962 and July 1965, Los Angeles law enforcement officers killed at least sixty-five people. Of the sixty-five homicides by police that the Los Angeles coroner's office investigated during this period, sixty-four were ruled justifiable homicides. They included twenty-seven cases in which the victim was shot in the back by law officers, twenty-five in which the victim was unarmed, twenty-three in which the victim was suspected of a non-violent crime, and four in which the victim was not suspected of any crime at the time of the shooting.[6]

The Party's Ten Point Platform and Program called for freedom, employment, decent housing, better education, and other basic human needs. The one point that caused them the most trouble dealt with their stance on self-defense.

The Black Panther Party's original Ten Point Program, first publicized in May of 1967 included:

Point 7 of 'What We Believe': We believe we can end police brutality in our Black community by organizing Black *self-defense* groups that are dedicated to defending our Black community from racist police oppression and brutality. The Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives a right to bear arms. We therefore believe that all Black people should arm themselves for *self- defense*.[7]

Emory Douglas's images of black people defending themselves created two oppositional results. First, they helped attract new people to the party as members and supporters. Second, the pictures also were perceived as threats to law enforcement, core institutions and values of the country. In the Panthers' view, their goal was to replace the status quo with a new reality. They were waging a revolution. (Figure 1. Emory Douglas)

Douglas defined revolutionary art in the Black Panther newspaper by writing, "We try to create an atmosphere for the vast majority of black people—who aren't readers but activists—through their observation of our work, they feel they have the right to destroy the enemy."[8]

Images have always been part of recording history. The immediacy of photojournalism, television, and fast printing technology for newspapers and magazines allowed images to become part of making history in the twentieth century. During the civil rights movement photographs quickly showed the world television and print images of fire hoses and dogs turned on peaceful black protestors by police

and public officials. Cultural critic Maurice Berger wrote, "The civil rights movement, in its campaign for racial equality and justice, would come to equate pictures with weapons."[9]

The violence, real or implied, depicted in so many *Black Panther* newspaper images caused the most anxiety for the party's critics. Douglas and the other artists used pens, ink and photographs as metaphorical weapons in addition to showing people using physical weapons. Guns served as a metaphor and symbol for empowerment and self-defense. Douglas explained the proliferation of guns in *Black Panther* images this way:

You have to understand, there were all kinds of guns out there at that time, particularly in the south—for hunting, for people to protect property and themselves. There was no issue with guns. Now you had black men talking about their constitutional right to bear arms. Guns had always been part of the landscape and part of American culture.[10]

A highly publicized incident in May 2,1967 most clearly spells out how fickle U.S. policy and public opinion have been on the subject of gun control. In 1967, thirty members of the Black Panther Party carried loaded guns to the California State Legislature in Sacramento to protest a bill that was being introduced on that day "to outlaw the carrying of loaded firearms in public."[11] This was in response to, in the bill's sponsor's words, "increasing incidence of organized groups and individuals publicly arming themselves."[12] At that time carrying a loaded gun in public was completely legal in California, as long as it was publicly displayed and pointed at no one.[13]

Ironically, then Governor Ronald Reagan, who remains the figurehead of the late twentieth century conservative movement in U.S. politics, signed the bill that made carrying guns in public illegal in California. Today in the U.S. right wing conservatives are lobbying hard to stifle gun control, citing second amendment rights. The Black Panther Party cited these same rights in their Ten Point Program, declaring their right to bear arms in self-defense.

Because of their frequent encounters with police during neighborhood patrols when they carried legal weapons, the Panthers were portrayed as pathological and provocatively violent by mass media, politicians, and many middle and upper class black people. There were several violent encounters and some deaths, including deaths of police officers but mostly of Party members, during these incidents. Even

though FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover called them the greatest threat to U.S. internal security, from the Panthers' point of view they did not have the ability or desire to wage a physical war, but would defend themselves. Their real power was their success in challenging capitalism, global imperialism, and systematic oppression of people of color.[14]

Douglas and the other Black Panther leaders understood the instructional utility of icons and symbols as language. He successfully took tools used by advertisers to promote consumer culture and subverted them to educate people about how to fight oppression. Often he drew archetypes of people who could be found in most communities. Readers looked at the images in the Black Panther newspaper and could see themselves. Douglas said he was representing his own family, "aunties, uncles—people in the neighborhood."[15] He wanted them to see themselves reclaiming power and drew it for them in his illustrations.

Powerful cartoons of policemen as pigs, specific calls to action, and affectionate depictions of regular black people in everyday life were part of his work. His intention was to give oppressed people tools to resist and create a visible identity in U.S. mass media.

The *Black Panther* newspaper visualized the Black Power movement's goals, taking up where civil rights legislation left off in changing the American ethos regarding race. Once African Americans were free from the physical aspects of centuries of institutionalized racism, the work of eliminating race-based discrimination as a normative idea escalated. All Americans, black and white, had to process a change from discriminatory thinking. For blacks this meant getting rid of internalized oppression, or any feelings of inferiority that had been assimilated from the majority white culture.

The Panthers were part of the larger Black Power movement, in challenging racism and raising consciousness, but were less nationalistic in their ideology. What they shared with the movement was a desire to reflect back positive images of black people who had been grotesquely caricatured in mainstream American visual culture. Douglas's drawings deliberately emphasized African features, promoting the "black is beautiful" aesthetic, which was essential to the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. This was empowering to black people who were constantly getting messages from mass media that their features were undesirable and less appealing than those of the majority white people. Celebrating the aesthetics of blackness alone

had a huge effect on shaping post civil rights black identity in the U.S.

Douglas created images that might seem like derogatory or offensive stereotypes in a different context. For example, an image of a woman with curlers in her hair wearing a robe and bedroom slippers seems sympathetic when she represents an everyday black woman struggling to take care of her family.

 (Figure 2. Emory Douglas)

His images of ordinary black people were more true to actual experience than those available through mass media. Before the 1960s, African Americans were virtually absent from popular culture and advertising with the exception of entertainers, athletes, and criminals. When advertising grew in the 19th century, "some of the earlier advertising featuring blacks was highly offensive and greatly exaggerated physical features."[16] As Marilyn Kern-Foxworth wrote in her book, about blacks in advertising, "Characters such as Aunt Jemima (depicted on the box of pancake mix), Uncle Ben (rice), and Rastus (Cream of Wheat) have remained as constant reminders of the subservient positions to which blacks have been relegated over the years."[17] In 1963, New York Telephone Company ran an advertisement that represented the first time an African-American was used in a general circulation publication (not marketed just to black people), as an "everyman."[18]

Douglas and the other Panther artists' drawings were meant for "…the millions of impoverished men and women demoralized by a steady diet of negative media stereotypes." [19] Disseminating empathetic images in affected communities was targeted marketing. As an antidote to the ubiquitous ads for liquor and cigarettes in black communities, people saw images that directly reached out to empower them, bypassing mainstream mass media altogether.

In addition to its popularity among black people living in ghettos, the Panther newspaper reached college campuses across the country where the audience was the youth counterculture. The vast majority of the students who followed the Panthers

were young, white, and disillusioned by capitalism, the Vietnam War, and inequality. At the height of its circulation, the *Black Panther* newspaper printed 100,000 copies a week, which were estimated to be read by four people each.[20]

The idea of using images as a primary form of communication in the Black Panther newspaper was a prescient one imagined by the party's leaders as television was working its way toward dominance in American media. They devoted full pages to images, which was unusual in a tabloid paper that covered news events. The belief that the written word is the most important way to communicate continues to erode as new media forms develop. Cultural critics who study the impact of media on culture—like Stephen Johnson and Mitchell Stephens—assert that images and new media forms can actually increase people's abilities to understand complex information.[21]

The most important message the Black Panther Party wanted to communicate was that people had the right to defend themselves against unlawful police action. Douglas believes the drawings had a cathartic effect and made people feel better and more in control of their lives. As he explained it, "The pig drawings had the most impact on people. They were a symbol representing the oppressor and the pig became an iconic symbol worldwide, describing oppression and showing self-defense."[22]

The Black Panthers did not invent the image of the policeman as pig. It can be traced back to the 1800s.[23] The policeman/pig was an icon as well as a semiotic condensation combining people's negative perceptions of pigs with oppressive police behavior. The Panthers and other activists made "pig" the default derogatory term for police that was widely used in the youth-led counterculture of their time.

Douglas described the genesis of the policeman as pig in the *Black Panther* newspaper:

> each
> were bad
> it came to
> snout and
> and badge.
>
> I was asked to do a drawing of a pig on four hooves. On that image week we were going to put the badge numbers of the police who actors so the community would know to watch out for them. Later my mind that I could stand the pig up on two hooves, keeping the the tail and the flies but leaving the police belt on it with a holster That became the icon called the pig."[24]

The pig's evolution to an anthropomorphic creature on two legs is an example of how Douglas's work continued to evolve over time—artistically and conceptually. Eventually he drew politicians like San Francisco's mayor and even Richard Nixon,

the   president   of   the   United   States,   as   pigs.

(Figure 3. Emory Douglas) More provocative than caricaturing leaders as pigs was the violence they often suffered on paper at the hands of the revolutionaries in Douglas's drawings. The intention was to wage a virtual war that was not possible in reality. From the Panthers' point of view, the pigs became effigies, receiving justice at the hands of people they had routinely brutalized. Douglas drew flies circling and lines indicating foul smells around the police/pigs to further indicate decay and depravity. These indexical, or cause and effect indications communicated the feelings people had about police and politicians who abused their power.

Emory Douglas's drawings visualized a virtual war that mobilized black people to take control of their own communities. The war was not just about fighting back the police. The *Black Panther* newspaper and its images also reported their efforts in offering health care, breakfast programs, support for seniors and community-building arts and entertainment activities.

In addition to images of armed conflict, Douglas's work intended to increase solidarity within black communities. Consciousness-raising on issues and perceptions was always at the core of the Panthers' message. Those who were most invested in the status quo felt extremely threatened by their messages to the rank and file of the party that rippled out to the black community and to the society at large. The real war was over the hearts and minds of people who were encouraged by mass media to believe in the current system to ensure its continuation.

Emory's work was similar to other anti-imperialist graphics made around the world. Lazaro Ebreu from Cuba used one of his illustrations in an OSPAAAL (Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America) poster he designed, which proclaimed "Solidarity with the African American People."[25] Chinese posters about Vietnam inspired Douglas, in addition to other art made in support of

international liberation movements. Douglas's work had an international feel to it, using color boldly, and dark outlines for emphasis. He incorporated the simple graphic imagery of Pop Art that was inspired by advertising techniques.

Some aspects of Douglas's work were products of the limitations and capabilities of technology. For example, he used sheets of adhesive-backed printed patterns to fill in large areas in his drawings to make them less flat. The front and back covers and some pages of the paper were printed in two colors each week. Douglas used his graphics skills to make the most of that second color, often giving the illusion that there were more. Using color attracted more readers. Some of the posters were printed larger with more colors and wheat-pasted onto walls, making the community a gallery.[26]

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. As Black Arts movement leader Larry Neal said, "Black art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept."[27]

Contemporary artists and designers like Shepard Fairey draw inspiration from aspects of Emory Douglas's work. Fairey's "absurd propaganda campaign" alluded to political posters from the 1960s and 70s, using existing associations with some Black Panther iconography to take the ideas a step further to irony. (Figure 4. Shepard

Fairey image seen in San Francisco, 2002) Fairey made the journey from an outsider guerilla artist, surreptitiously putting his works out in public spaces to "a new height of prominence in 2008, when his 'HOPE' portrait of Barack Obama became the iconic image of the presidential campaign."[28] This is the best example of a once radical iconography being assimilated into mainstream culture. The outsiders are now inside.

Emory Douglas influenced an entire generation of young contemporary activist artists in the U.S., who fight for causes like immigration rights and the Occupy Wall Street movement (developed in response to rampant bank abuse and financial collapse). Favianna Rodriguez, who works on projects with Douglas in the San Francisco Bay Area, is a Latina activist on a range of issues, but concentrates on

immigration. Her work features stylized human figures representing "every person" in the same way that Douglas's *Black Panther* drawings did.

Even in this time of instant Internet access and social media, activist artists still cling to the poster tradition. During the Occupy Wall Street protests, artists put images online that could be downloaded and posted in public, multiplying their visibility. Protest posters are still effective despite their anachronism.

Douglas's work put specific images and visual memes permanently into popular culture, similar to the Korda photograph that became the ubiquitous posterized—to just black and white—icon of Che Guevara. The icon of Huey Newton wearing a black beret, with a red star behind his head, which was on the masthead of every *Black Panther* newspaper, references that image and its implied heroism. The raised fist sign used by Black Panthers, although not created by them, is another overused symbol. Using a technique that dates back hundreds of years to halos painted on icons of saints, Emory Douglas often drew lines radiating from people's heads on the front cover of the paper. The lines seem to be almost shouting. The idea was to beatify the people shown and make them seem larger than life or saintly—party leaders, martyrs, and sometimes ordinary people. This device was also often used in advertising and now seems retro kitsch. It uses optical illusion to simulates depth, another device borrowed from Pop and Op Art. (Figure 5. Emory Douglas)

Techniques that Emory Douglas so often used in his work have become almost clichés in U.S. visual culture. He used cartoon materials and style to create illustrations about serious subjects. This is an example of postmodern pastiche, the mixing of different styles into one piece. In the tradition of surrealist collage artists like Hannah Hoch, he often included photographs. Sometimes there were different narratives in one image with a separate message communicated through texts

embedded in the overall image. His work contributed to a new level of complexity in images meant for quick public consumption.

Many of the images and devices he used are now common in graphic design for advertising and promoting products and services. Ironically, this brings Douglas's work full circle because he used some of the memes and devices of advertising to make his work resonate visually to an increasingly sophisticated audience.

Douglas's work was postmodern before its time. His images, originally created in the vernacular forms of cartoons and newspaper illustrations are now elevated to the status of fine art and shown in museums like the New Museum in New York City and the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, where he has had retrospectives. Postmodernism blurs the boundaries between "high" and "low" art, treating all media as equal. The original copies of his work no longer exist because he made them from inexpensive materials that deteriorate over time. In addition to some original offset printed posters owned by long-time collectors, his work mostly survives in the form of aging newspapers in libraries and archives.

In a way the warriors in the pages of the Black Panther newspaper were the 1960s and 70s version of avatars—icons who stood in for the viewers and cathartically acted out scenarios not possible in real life. Douglas said about his work:

"The drawings weren't meant to be passive. They were meant to be provocative. The drawings… expressed the underlying feelings of people who were in the community being confronted by these issues of police abuse oppression. You had to feel what they felt in order to do that.[29]

Currently Emory Douglas still designs posters, makes drawings, and travels all over the world collaborating with other artists and talking about his work. He has worked on immigration, pollution and toxic dumping, freeing political prisoners, welfare of children, human rights and other issues. He brings his talent, understanding of evolving visual culture, and dedication to social and political change. In recent years he learned to use computer software to create some of his images. Douglas has been invited as a visiting artist to Manchester and London in England, Paris, Cologne, Rotterdam, and the countries Ireland, Tanzania, Australia, Sweden, and New Zealand. He makes a point of working and interacting with young people wherever he goes. Usually he works on a community project like a mural, with local and indigenous people, incorporating their intentions and visual style.

In his travels Douglas always tells the story of how he and Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver, along with many others, changed the narrative of Black America. He closes his talks by saying, "All Power to the People."

Notes

[1] Mark Reynolds, "*'Black Against Empire'* Assumes a Central and Critical Spot Within the Black Panther Canon." *PopMatters.* April 11, 2013. http://www.popmatters.com/pm/column/170221-black-against-empire/.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Jane Rhodes, introduction in *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon.* (New York: New Press, 2007), 2007, 3.

[4] *New York Times.* "F.B.I. Brands Black Panthers 'Most Dangerous' of Extremists: Report Also Hits Weathermen as Guiding Force Behind Violent Young People." July 14, 1970. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009).

[5] Charles E Jones, *The Black Panther Party (reconsidered).* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 164.

[6] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 28-29.

[7] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 71.

[8] Philip S. Foner, ed. *The Black Panthers Speak* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1995), 16.

[9] Maurice Berger. *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights.* New Haven: Yale UP, 2010, 3.

[10] Douglas, Emory. Personal interview. 8 Apr. 2011

[11] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 57

[12] Ibid.

[13] Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 109.

[14] "FBI Director Blacks Black Panthers," *Oakland Tribune*, July 15, 1969.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 30.

[17] Ibid. xviii.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Maurice Berger. *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights.* New Haven: Yale UP, 2010, 170.

[20] Emory Douglas, interview by author, April 8, 2011.

[21] Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word (New York: Oxford University Press*, 1998)

Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005)

[22] Emory Douglas, interview by author, April 8, 2011.

[23] Erika Doss, "Revolutionary Art as a Tool for Liberation" in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy*, ed. Kathleen Cleaver and George N. Katsiaficas (New York: Routledge, 2001), 183.

[24] Emory Douglas, interview by author, April 8, 2011.

[25] Lincoln Cushing, *Revolución!: Cuban Poster Art* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003), 75.

[26] Emory Douglas, interview by author, April 8, 2011.

[27] Larry Neal. "The Black Arts Movement." *Drama Review* Summer (1968).

[28] "Obey Giant," *OBEY CLOTHING*, About, accessed May 9, 2013, http://obeyclothing.com/about/.

[29] Emory Douglas, interview by author, April 8, 2011.

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