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► **To cite this version:**

Michael Tsangaris. Re-adapting radical forms of expression in the digital era -Investigating new aspects of recuperation 1. XIX ISA World Congress of Sociology / RC57 Visual Sociology, Jul 2018, Toronto, Canada. hal-02349016

**HAL Id: hal-02349016**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02349016>**

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

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## Re-adapting radical forms of expression in the digital era - Investigating new aspects of recuperation<sup>1</sup>.

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Undoubtedly, all past media forms held possibilities for alternative communications but most of the times commodification that turns everything into *'Spectacle'* degenerated such options. Even some of the most experimental forms of painting, photography, music or moving images, after all, removed far away from the original ideological frames in which they were initially created, and got absorbed by the mainstream cultural industry. In fact, alternative media forms such as aggressive rock music, street graffiti or tattoos, were initially used to express distinctive youth cultural scenes or counter-movements challenging the dominant culture. Nowadays all those radical expressions are getting into mainstream circulation for commercial purposes and they are exploited by the very culture which they intended to challenge. In this sense, the transformative power of mainstream media visual encounters cultivates mimicry and converts ideologies and myths into commercial fashion. Visual critical pedagogy investigating such concepts can encourage multiple and contradictory interpretations, refusing neutralized and static perceptions of culture. The investigation of the cases mentioned above will also take under consideration that perhaps we are marching through the final stage of a complicated recuperation process: the social media era. Is this the dawn of an open and horizontal communication system that abolishes hierarchal authorities, promoting progressive ideas at the service of social communities; or is it the *'Empire'*, that strikes back supported by global media enterprises, aspiring to take control over existence? This work has been partly supported by the University of Piraeus Research Center.

**keywords:** recuperation, punk scene, graffiti, tattoo, social media, Situationist International

### Introduction

According Becker (1963; 1982), art and deviance are settled by social conventions that usually follow some typical processes of social interaction. Individuals and social groups act according to socially-defined labels that are established and maintained over time as protocols. Besides, the repetition of some typical actions affirms them as objective entities and establishes collective conventions that define what reality is (Berger and Luckmann 1991). As all these conventions and patterns are established and institutionalized, a shared sense of reality is constructed, confirmed and reproduced (Searle 1995).

As early as the nineteen-sixties, the Situationist International (SI) declared that the late capitalist society that was based on mass commodity production had already caused a significant qualitative change in people's experience of everyday life, which led initially to the downgrading of being into having, and then from having to appearing (Debord 1970).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been presented at the XIX ISA World Congress of Sociology / RC57 Visual Sociology, Toronto Canada, 19 July 2018

The concept of the spectacle does not refer only to simple theories of manipulation by using labels that will progressively lead to social conventions, it defines decisively what social reality is. The spectacle is much more than an institution of socialization, or a propaganda mechanism that merely seeks to influence opinions. The spectacle has its roots in representation that is considered an essential human quality.

Humans understand and communicate their lives deductively as narratives (Bruner 2004). Human experience is inherently multisensory. Each human sense provides different frameworks of experience. Expressions very often use representation as a tool for communication. Representation that is the basis of the symbolic culture, presupposes a separation between the form and the concept, thus the symbolic expression and the actual thought. This separation imposes a mediation that always changes the original meaning. Thus, signs and symbols are always mediums that restrict the communication of the immediate human experience through certain channels, most regularly ideologically orientated, by abstraction, presenting selective perspectives that misrepresent the totality of the social process. Symbolic culture filters perception via the interpretation of social reality through the signs. Zerzan (2003) puts under consideration the axiom that symbolic thought is an intrinsic human quality. Perhaps symbolic representation has developed as a false communication experience, either a cultural or psychological deflection. In any case, the symbolic way of abstract expression and comprehension can limit communication, and the excessive dependence on this process leads to objectification, alienation and preconception. According to Goody (1997) for many generations before 'civilization', people did many things with their minds, including communication, without the symbolic process that is primarily a closed system.

However, when Debord talked about the 'Society of the Spectacle', he was mostly referring to the aggravation of this phenomenon in late capitalism and considered that the excess begun sometime in the third decade of the twentieth century (Debord 1998: 4). According to Jappe (1991: 21), the spectacle at this excess appears in many guises: different political views and tempers, contrasting life styles, antagonistic artistic attitudes and so on. People are urged to express their opinion and to choose one of the false alternatives, so that they will never question the whole.

A theoretical summary of the concept delineates spectacle as the 'subjugation of the world to the economy, the fetishism of goods, reification, alienation, ideology, and specifically, how images, representations, entertainment prevent authentic life from coming into being' (Kaufmann 2003: 160).

Actually, the concept of the spectacle defies precise definition because it is usually employed as a concrete proverb to convey all the negative parts of the late capitalism.

In sum, the spectacle for the SI embodied the separation between symbolic expression and actual human activity and thought, and all the consequences that this fact brought, such as the separation of power, the division of labour, the market economy, the omnipotence of the image and the extension of capitalist relations to every aspect of life. Thus, the concept of the spectacle is used as a theoretical model to describe how power functions from several apparently unrelated, unprejudiced sources to achieve a standardized effect for late capitalism (Crary 1989).

According to the SI capitalism is not a creative force, but a recuperative one. In the case of labor for example, human creativity and ingenuity are being recuperated to mass production that alienates the workers and, in this respect, the real social value of creativity is objectified and reduced to routine and work to be done. In the society of the spectacle the human creativity and the human expression are used not to serve for personality fulfillment but to make profit and reproduce the same system (Jappe 1999: 99).

As the capitalist system is constantly produced and reproduced at an ever-higher level, the form of consolidation becomes more and more profound with reflective consequences on human consciousness until it becomes a component of it (Lukács 1923: 9). According Duncum (2002) ideology deals with ordinary cultural artefacts and it can be hard to resist because it regularly appears to belong to the realm of the natural. Visual pedagogy can uncover ideology within the realm of the everyday life, exploring what lies behind images and more specifically the material conditions of their production, distribution and the specific interests that they serve (Duncum 2001), preparing in this way the students for resistance against oppression by hidden forms of power.

Capitalism has adopted recuperation that is an armor that the spectacle provides to prevent damages being inflicted by apostates of the system. The spectacle embodies a property that mechanically protects it, that is, the selective nature of representation that makes possible the process of recuperation. Representation, by selecting only harmless parts of the deviance and the unwanted, shapes forms compatible to the system, assimilating political, social and cultural opposition to capitalism through the spectacle. In this respect, contrasting concepts can be compiled and unified into commercial forms. In the society of the spectacle everything becomes possible, that is commercial rebellious music, street art galleries, fashionable counter-culture emblems, etc. and follow up absurd hybrid products such as the Che Guevara vodka, the Tattooed Barbie, etc.

According Knabb (1981: 372), the SI used the term recuperation in the sense that the system is recovering something that has escaped and revolted, avoiding in this way a potential overthrow. The recuperation of a radical act or idea can be realized by separating parts from the total revolutionary claim and incorporating them into the spectacle as cultural elements, while not necessarily obtaining the approval or implementation by the part of the system or the resistance. Co-option (co-optation) is a similar concept that was coined by Selznick in his study 'Foundations of the Theory of Organization' (1948). However, co-option seems to obtain the approval or implementation by the system and the opposition<sup>2</sup>.

In his mythologies Barthes (1972), gave examples of this process. A small 'inoculation' of an 'acknowledged evil' can protect the bourgeois establishment against the risk of a generalized subversion. The signs through which the capitalist society projected the subversive elements needed in

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<sup>2</sup> 'Cooption-Cooptation is the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy, determining the structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence. This is a defensive mechanism, formulated as one of a number of possible predicates available for the interpretation of organizational behavior' (Selznick 1948: 34). Many scholars use the term cooptation in the same sense as I use the term recuperation in this article (Hebdige and Potter 2007, Luedicke and Giesler 2007)

the consumer culture bear very little relation to their actual strength. Isolated from the real context, these signs of subversion can become symbols that may produce different effects. They can exploit consumers eagerness to identify with rebellious and anti-authority potentialities and present their indignation for social injustice in their daily shopping. Thus, the business world exploits the images and introduces a second order of signification, a secondary myth that symbolises something different from the initial meaning. Rebellion is accessible through consumption. The rebellious mythical image is appropriated to sell all sorts of products and services, (t-shirts, beer, financial services, etc.). When people buy products with counter-cultural emblems on them, they think they are making personal statements of rebellion and anti-capitalism. Nevertheless, those emblems have become part of the commodity system and so the acquisition of those products support consumer society. Commercial culture takes a real concept that may have dangerous implications for the system and turns it into an image which as Barthes pointed out, has been safely re-invented as a myth.

Still, as Combre (2011) has investigated the possibility that both processes of commodification and radicalization of Che Guevara's image can coexist. In her work reviewed that there is no real evidence that revolutionary images can be de-politicized by commercialism after all, and in this sense they may continue to function as a virtual prosthetics for political ideas.

In any case, the visual investigation of former counter cultural emblems and their adjustments through time, can be a prolific pedagogical tool for fostering students with social awareness, enabling them to realise some of the methods that capitalism uses for conditioning radical reactionaries and to comprehend the 'political passivity bred by the culture of illusion' (Hedges 2009).

Scholars that studied the various youth (and adult) cultures within societies used the terms counter-mores (Lasswell 1935), contra-cultures (Yinger 1960), counter-cultures (Roszak 1969), sub-cultures (Hall and Jefferson 1993) and most recently, the flexible shapes of post-subcultures, neo-tribes (Brookman 2001) and scenes (Bennett and Peterson 2004; Straw 2015; Tsangaris and Agrafioti 2017). All those scholars investigated from various perspectives those cultures, as youth socialization mechanisms, as social class homologies, as deviance forces, as social movements, as marginalization or integration systems, etc. always in relation to the dominant culture<sup>3</sup>.

However, anti-establishmentarianism always exists inside these social groups, embodied usually to their extreme and radical core. The values and forms of all those categories necessarily differ and conflict in some measure with dominant culture. Personality plays also a significant role in this argument, so individuals that follow these categorizations possess rates of rebellion, in respect to their personal criteria and their integration to each group or community. In this sense, contemporary counter-cultures,

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<sup>3</sup> According Clarke (Clarke et al 2000) 'sub-cultures' that have working class origin and clearly articulated collective structures close to gangs are fluctuating between the constraints of dominant institutions (home, school, work) and those of leisure (peer-group associations, etc.). Most possibly are socially introverted, representing an appropriation of the 'ghetto'. 'Counter-cultures' have middle-class origins, are less group-centered and more individualized. Most possibly they are socially extroverted but tend to construct enclaves within the interstices of the dominant culture, struggling for an 'alternative society'. In this article, without considering class homologies, I use the term counter culture as any social group that is opposed to the dominant culture. While counter cultures are always against the dominant culture, I consider the term sub cultures wider, including also cultures that not necessarily operate always against the system.

just like the old delinquent gangs investigated in the fifties by Yablonsky (1959), are characterised by an imprecise definition of boundaries.

The separate values and norms of counter cultures may involve many aspects of life such as, systems of communication (language, dialects, art, fashions etc.), systems of beliefs (ideologies, ethics, ideals etc.) and social organization (group parameters, types of administration, policies and strategies etc) and social practices, (demographics, laws, behaviour, diets, customs, etc.). All these norms are learned by interaction within the counter culture community.

A basic activity for the existence of counter cultures that belongs to the symbolic systems of signification is the creation and the maintenance of distinct visual characteristics and emblems. The visual identities of counter cultural groups although presuppose social labelling, stereotyping and stigmatisation, they provide also internal coherence and distinction from conventional appearance and the mainstream fashion.

Although there has been a great variety of symbols and practises (visual, rituals, activism, etc.) with which the counter cultural scenes have been periodically expressed, at this point I will list some of the most common such as black clothing, tattoos, spiky or shaved hair, mohawk, ripped jeans, bowver boots, the circle-A, the black flag, the peace sign, the swastika, the skull and crossbones symbol, wall slogans, stencils, graffiti, motorcycles, black leather jackets, body piercing, etc.

On this this study I will not focus on the analysis and the differences of diverse cultural groups, but instead I will review how counter cultural visual emblems and practises are defined, categorized, redefined and recuperated by the dominant culture.

### **Basis of the approach**

This study investigates contemporary developments of visual signification concerning former emblems of resistance in the contemporary mixed media environment. It is a part of a larger theoretical project that examines historically the social, ideological and aesthetic dimension of recuperation of counter cultures from the dominant culture.

The examination of the circulation and evolution of alternative visual elements in contemporary society, and more specifically the investigation of counter-cultural emblems interaction with the mainstream culture is very important for a better understanding of the recuperation process.

Though for the past decades counter cultural emblems belonged to the sphere of alternative media and followed narrow diffusion, nowadays the digital communication technologies and the Web 2.0 applications have enhanced the capacities of their circulation.

This article should be primarily understood as a theoretical and explorative review for the concept of recuperation, although it is supported largely by visual material selected mostly by the social media, to highlight the changes that the new communications systems brought. In a world almost totally mediated by the spectacle, supported from a variety of media, counter cultural emblems after repetitive

appropriation become banalities. Without retrospective inspection and visual evidence from the past, it is difficult for someone to realise how visual representations are being constantly encoded and reencoded, changing cultural meanings over time.

As Tavin (2003) notes critical pedagogy 'supports the study of popular culture in order to understand and challenge the way subjectivities are constituted through images and imagining'. Accordingly, critical visual pedagogy concerning the history and the evolution of counter cultural emblems, apart the fact that enhances human skills in pictorial perception and understanding is also valuable for the recognition of the way cultural appropriations and meaning adjustments are constituted through images. In this sense it can empower students to notice and meaningfully involve in the contemporary ideological and cultural struggles.

The data of this study are selected from different sources such as social media, blogs and alternative counter-culture web sites, advertisements, illustrated books and albums.

Past and contemporary images are collocated in couples, according their emblem thematic, in order to present the contrasting result of their visual confrontation. Beneath each pair of images follows a brief semiotic discourse that simplifies decoding, with reference to the dominant culture of the time they were produced respectively.

In this sense, based upon real-world contemporary media practices and representations, by bringing up historical and theoretical references, I will present an instructive framework concerning recuperation and the complexity of the present-day visual culture.

### **Applications of visual recuperation**

In order to explore visually how does the process of recuperation operate, I will present particular alternative communication modes that have been used by social groups formerly for the symbolic construction of resistance against the dominant culture, referring also to their contemporary meaning. In this respect, visual symbols and ritual practices such as punk haircuts and clothing, tattoos, wall slogans, graffiti and stencils, although once served to express and to conceptualize the differentiation and the antithesis between subversive groups and the establishment, today are re-organized in the terms of the main culture and provide a different meaning.

During the seventies mohawk hairstyles, dog collars and studded black leather jackets were typical accessories of the punk generation. Punk is one of the most prominent examples of countercultures that can be very convenient for the purposes of this analysis as it was mainly using symbolic communication practices. It was a radical youth rebellion that first emerged during the seventies, against the difficult political economic and social conditions of the recession that affected most of the Western World. It turned up also as an objection against the state of apathy that prevailed at that time concerning youth cultures and music scenes. Punk included a great number of distinctive styles of clothing and adornment (stripped jeans, offensive T-shirts, studded black leather jackets, shaved or spiked hair, bondage accessories etc.). The punk scene initially developed through alternative communication channels

(bootleg recordings, gigs, stencils, fanzines, etc.), however, very soon a great part of it was also promoted by the mainstream media (big record companies, radio stations, the music press, big concerts etc.). It expressed a great number of rebellious viewpoints ranging across various political and social spectrums, from extreme anarcho-punk collectives and radical leftists to nazi punks, fascist skinheads, part-time teenage punks, hardcore, straight edge, and so on. Although their significant internal variations, the punk neo-tribes were all characterized by a tension for revolt and subversion challenging the contemporary culture.



Picture 1. Manchester punks 1976



Picture 2. Top ten haircuts 2016

At that times an image of three young males dressed in typical punk clothing, gesturing ironically at the camera (Picture 1) denoted concepts such as rebellion, hooliganism and anarchy. If this photograph was published in the daily press, it would possible provoke disapproval, anger or disgust of the bourgeois society. This image represented an alarm and a possible threat for the conservative middle-class of the seventies.

Forty years later, a web-site that presents the year's top ten haircuts published an image, depicting a gentle and moderate male wearing an expensive suit with a mohawk hairstyle. Obviously, the conventional signifying system and ethical codes that correlate signifiers and signifieds, concerning hairstyles and appearances have been reformed. Today, the mohawk haircut does not recall any more social marginality but a trendy fashionable style. Additionally, there is a text following in the webpage, giving the practical advice that in order to look 'catchy and handsome, you have to care about your appearance and it will be a perfect idea to change your look from time to time'.

In this manner, the image of the mohawk gradually lost its power as a punk emblem and the symbolic link that related this hairstyle to anti-authority worldviews was abolished once and for all.





Picture 3. The Ramones



Picture 4. Commercial ripped jeans

Ripped clothes for centuries were associated mostly with the less fortunate. However, during the seventies the photograph of four males with long mop-top hair, black leather jackets, short t-shirts and ripped straight jeans was one of the images that constructed the Ramones myth signifying the concept of the 'teenage rebel' (Picture 3).

A contemporary commercial web advertisement that promotes a pair of ripped jeans (Picture 4) inevitable imposes that 'the times they are a changin''. Certainly, popular fashion is a meaning system and a general trend influenced by several factors such as the cloth industry, the mass media, the music scenes, gender, class, ethnicity, etc. The continuing demand for profit keeps the fashion industry changing and as a result the trends can accept anything as a possible style line. Originally, ripped jeans, torn clothing and the safety pins were typical emblems of the Punk scene. Later in the nineties the Grunge scene adopted also similar emblems. After the millennium, the ripped jeans became gradually widespread by commercial fashion and still they are very common.

The Ramones myth has been gradually dismantled by the market, and its demystified parts gained clear commercial meanings. The cultural industry finally dissolved a typical image of the 'teenage rebel' by commercializing parts of it.



Picture 5. Sex Pistols in the seventies



Picture 6. Virgin Money Debit Cards 2016

The Sex Pistols (Picture 3) activated their myth as basic emblems of the seventies counter-culture after releasing the song 'Anarchy in the UK' in 1976. They achieved anchoring the concept of counter-culture to their image, although in reality they can be considered as one of the punk bands that were co-opted very soon with the rules of the market<sup>4</sup>.

The year 2016 that was officially celebrated as the fortieth anniversary of Punk rock, an 'Anarchy in the UK' credit card was designed by a multinational corporation, so the consumers can 'put a little bit of rebellion in their pockets' (Jones 2015). The marketing managers realised that labelling a product as 'radical' is a very efficient technique to increase sales. It is based on the idea that gives the opportunity for the consumers to oppose and express their covert anger against the injustice of late capitalism.

Although the image of Sex Pistols can be still perceived as a connotation for the early punk music scene, it is relocated to a peculiar type of superficial commercialized rebellion, and in such a way it converts social discontent and subterranean values into mechanisms that motivate the consumer.

Tattoo culture in the Western World is quite old. Although there was a short trend for the social elite to get tattoos at the turn of nineteenth century (Kosut 2000), during the twentieth century the broader middle class considered tattoos as deviant practices that characterized specific social groups like sailors, mercenaries, soldiers of the lowest military rank, bikers, prisoners, drug addicts, punks, rockers, hooligans, gangsters, skinheads etc. Additionally, many people that were coming from the lower working class were attracted by the tattoo culture as well.

In this respect, people that had tattoos developed as a segregated heterogenous counterculture that carried signs of resistance against the white, heterosexual, middle-class cultural domination (DeMello 2000).

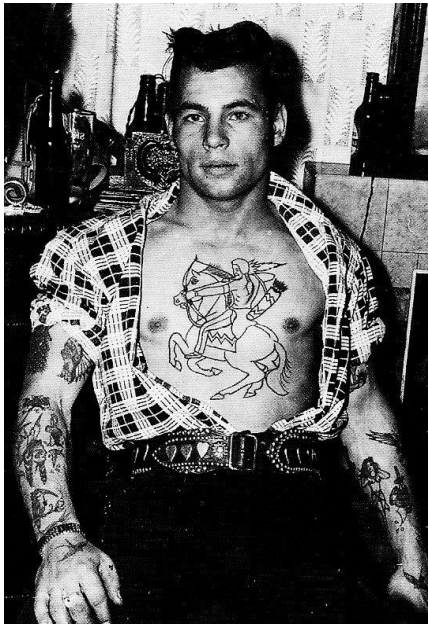
During the nineties tattoos became commercialized by the mainstream media through celebrities that wanted to express creatively themselves, and since then the popular acceptance of tattoos as an artistic personal emblem became very common. Today, tattooing is a common way for people to express aesthetically their own desired images but is also a phenomenon that reflects cultural influences (Kosut 2000).

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<sup>4</sup> The punk music scene although evolved as a do-it-yourself counter culture, it kept a very strange relationship with the commercial world and the fashion industry. As early as 1978, Laing (1978:127) had observed that punk clothing, 'was soon transformed by the avant-garde of the fashion industry into a new and expensive trend'. Dave and Stuart Wise the core of the 1960's British revolutionary group King Mob, once part of the English section of the SI, argued that although punk was commercialized, becoming a form of recuperation that turned the anti-authority movement into aggressive pop music, at the same time some people that were attracted to punk were transcending that representation. Thus, there was a lot of punk expression in the riots of 1991 in Great Britain which was direct struggle on the street. The people that were attracted to punk managed to brake their initial representations, and, in this sense, recuperation can break down when something real is happening (Permanent Culture Now, 2016) 'Veteran Situationists behind King Mob and 'Revolt Against Plenty', YouTube (29/4/2018) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttSCSpnDSqA>

The image of male young rocker with greasy hair and lots of tattoos (Picture 7) would generated 'moral panic' (Cohen 1972) to the bourgeois society of the sixties. Representations of youth subcultures at that time was connected to hooliganism, street fights, riots and generally public disturbance. Forty years after the connotations of these images have changed. The present-day marketing communication practices use concepts such as rebellion, distinctiveness and vanity as basic factors to influence consumer behavior.

Today, post-modern consumers can buy a variety of identities and attitudes embedded to products (Evans et al 2006), moving away from the model of the homogeneous mass consumer. A jeans advertising campaign in 2009, presented in a series pictures Josh Beech, a young British musician wearing a white tank top with his hands full of tattoos (Picture 8). Although both images presented moody tattooed males, the recent one has lost the original concept of deviation that characterizes the old one. Instead of generating a sense of 'moral panic' to the public, it suggests a cool identity for the young consumers.



Picture 7. Tattoo: Les Skuse, Bristol, Great Britain, 1960s



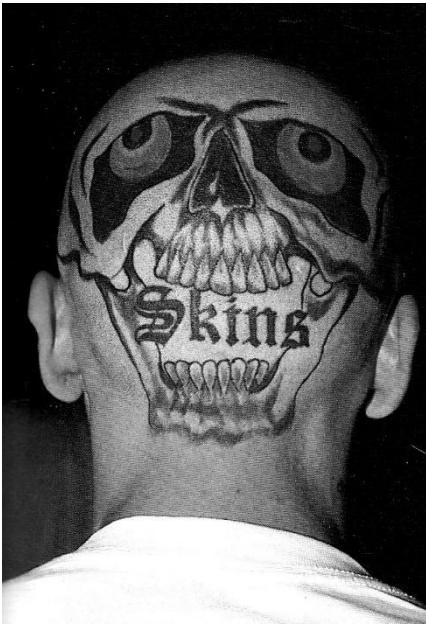
Picture 8. Live Unbuttoned Levi's 501, Josh Beech photographed by David Vasiljevic

Skinheads emerged as a distinct subculture in Great Britain near the end of the sixties. They developed a way of look that included shaved hair, steel toe-capped polished boots, short rolled up jeans, green army nylon flyers jackets and tattoos. They adopt this outfit to articulate impressions of masculinity, 'hardness' and 'working-classness' in order to achieve uniformity and unity of their community (Clarke 2000). They represented a counter-cultural movement that was against not just the middle-class prevalence, but aggressive to everyone that had pretensions to social superiority. Skinheads were also obsessed with football and during the eighties in the revival of the movement a great part of them had tendencies to nationalism, fascism racism and hostility toward minorities and immigrants (Knight and Night 1982). Tattoos were one of the basic emblems of the skinhead culture during the eighties. An

image of a tattooed skinhead at that time would certainly signify trouble, bringing up feelings related to fear and 'moral panic'.

The commercialization and popularization of tattoo after the millennium brought together a variety of comics, books and toys for the young consumers such as Tattoo Parlor Kit, tattooed Barbie, tattooed Lego, etc. The 'Lego Tattoo Campaign' for pens in 2010, mimicked the masculine and hard appearance of tattooed skinheads and bikers, shifting those associations to the product as values. As tattooing has been transformed from a legendary deviant code to a common cultural custom, advertisers can relate tattoos with commercial products.

Thus nowadays children are growing up, and playing with tattoo associated toys, in a society that is undoubtedly tattoo-friendly than any other time in western history (Kosut 2006: 1036).



Picture 9. Skinhead tattoo



Picture 10. Lego tattoo campaign

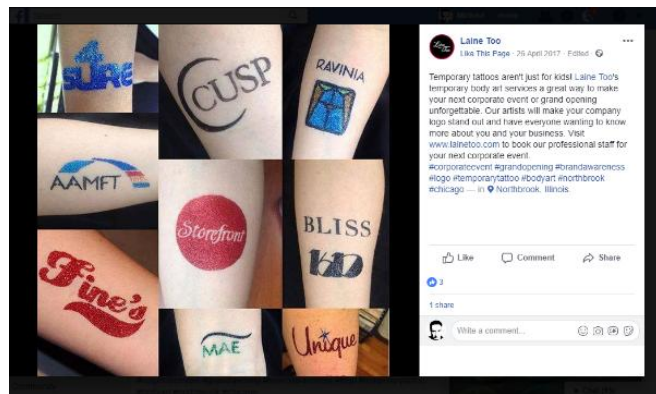
The motorcycle is almost a sacred object for biker gangs because it has the special power to transport them and to offer them experiences beyond the ordinary. Harley Davidson is one of the favourite bikes for outlaw motorcycle clubs. Bikers customize their motorcycles according their own tastes, changing the colour, the fenders, the handle bars, the seats, the gas tanks, etc. Sometimes, they even rebuilt them mechanically adding extra power to the engine. In this sense, they feel released by the capitalist models of mass serial production and the Fordist uniformity and express their individuality. Their aim is to look bad and different to show the world that they are not part of conventional society (Hopper and Moore 1983). In honour of their special relation with their bikes, the motorcycle outlaws get decorated corporate motorcycle logo tattoos (picture 11). Far from advertising, the significations that those tattoos basically express is gang unity, freedom, disobedience and rebellion. In this occasion the tattooing of

motorcycle brands functions as a détournement<sup>5</sup> and is clearly a ritual that belongs to the anti-cultural sphere.

The 'supermarket era' of tattooing (Atkinson 2003) increased the popularity of corporate logo tattoo that carries signifiers of consumerist society reinforcing the process of the commodification (Orend and Gagne 2009). Posts on the social media advertise temporary corporate logo tattoos, suggesting that is 'a great way to make your next corporate event or grand opening unforgettable' (picture 12). In this sense, the omnipotence of consumerism supported by the social media demystifies counter-cultural rituals and disactivates détournements in order to recuperate them back to safe as practices of marketing.



Picture 11. Harley Davidson tattoo



Picture 12. Corporate Logo Tattoos

Wall slogans and graffiti for many years functioned as alternative media that can communicate social arguments and discontent by the oppressed social groups who are normally excluded from media production, contesting for the advancement of a co-operative society (Downing 2001; Fuchs 2010). Very often alternative media are connected to community uprisings, protests and social movements that belong to the sphere of resistance (Downing 2008). In May of 1968, a great number wall slogan made by the SI were widespread all over Paris. One of their typical slogans that was graffitied since 1953 addressed to people 'never to work' (Picture 13). The slogan supported the struggle against workers alienation, representing counter cultural beliefs for the abolishment of capitalism.

<sup>5</sup> The process of 'détournement' is a guerrilla communication practice initiated by the Letterist International and the SI referring to reformed artistic representations and techniques that can turn the expressions of capitalism and its culture against itself (Debord, G. and Wolman G. J. 1956)

In opposition, contemporary promotional graffiti on canvas, seems to represent the values that most alternative communication practices traditionally struggled to confront, that is, the prevalence of mainstream messages that are inclined by the consumerist culture. Picture 14 presents clearly the co-option of graffiti with the advertising film production.



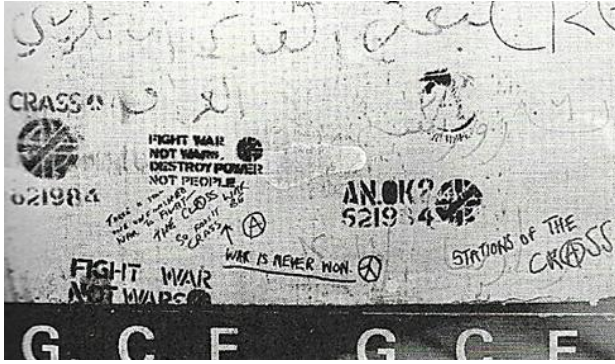
Picture 13. Never Work



Picture 14. Puma Graffiti on Canvas – Advertising production

Advertisements assimilated radical media aesthetic forms and used the same techniques that the marginal groups used. Stencil is a technique for the visual reproduction of the same pattern many times, by applying colour through a layer surface with designed gaps. Unauthorised stencils can be traced in the late thirties during the Spanish Civil War and at the same time in Italy under the fascist regime. Punk groups used very often the spray stencil reproduction technique to disseminate anti-establishment slogans. During the late seventies the Crass, initiated a great stencil anti-establishment campaign at the underground stations of London (Picture 15) that was diffused in such an extent, that later in the nineties when personal computers were commercialised, a type font for text editors with the authentic crass stencil style was named after the band's name (Manco 2002; Berger 2009; Tsangaris 2018). In this sense, an aesthetic counter cultural form was recuperated.

Some years later, during the nineties many graffiti writers turned to professional muralists using the form of graffiti-stencil for advertising purposes (Picture 16). Forms, processes and techniques that promoted free speech, alternative opinions and social contention lost their actual radical signification and got neutralized by the spectacle.



Picture 15. Crass graffiti at Bond street station 1979 (Dial House Collection)

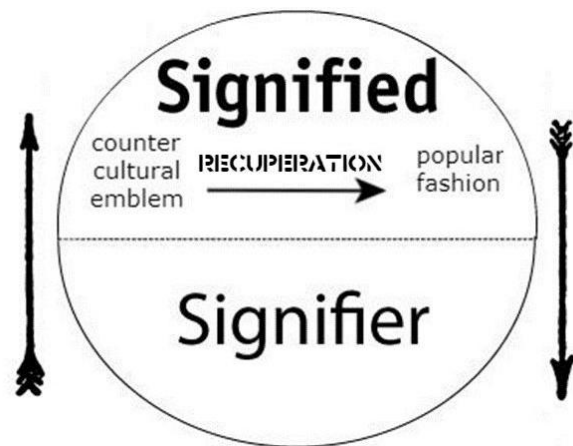


Picture 16. Living in Harmony – Coca Cola, TATS CRU, Inc

To sum up, with the assistance of the typical two-sided semiotic saussurean sign, the signified as time passes undergoes an irreversible transformation through the process of recuperation. The initial bond between the signifier and the signified of counter cultural symbols that could threaten the capitalist system is distorted. Signifiers of counter cultural emblems are becoming common by the mechanisms of mainstream cultural industry and can be related also to fashionable, clothing, trendy practices etc.



Picture 17. Saussure's two-sided sign



Picture 18. Saussure's two-sided sign during the process of recuperation

### Recuperation and Social Media

The 'Spectacle' according to the SI does not represent just images of fashion, advertisements, cinema and the media, it mostly consists a schema that describes how power operates non-coercively, not from a single authority but from several superficially unrelated, unprejudiced sources to achieve a homogenous effect (Crary 1989). The spectacle appears always under a variety of different trends, various ideologies, contrary life styles, etc. It urges people to choose just one of these main sources in order not to question the totality.

For Downing (2001), the expression 'alternative media' is an oxymoron. The term can signify all different suggestions that each of them has the possibility to take the place of the main system and become conventional. That is, by defining mainstream corporations as the 'standard' condition for media, a great number of alternative versions arise in relation to their content, organization, ownership, technology, location, etc. such as oppositional media, activist media, citizens media, tactical media, radical media, social movement media, community media and so on. Atton (2001), made a point arguing that alternative media are crucially about offering the means for democratic communication to people that are excluded from media production. In this respect, Fuchs (2010) considered that alternative media studies are often strongly connected to anti-authoritarian perspectives due to their shared focus on self-organizing practices that tend to idealize small-scale production.

In this study I located specific examples of alternative media counter cultural forms, recuperated by the dominant culture mechanisms, that can be easily diffused by social media. Nowadays, images of counter cultural emblems are promoted extensively by social media, sometimes neutralizing their initial anti-establishment qualities. Perhaps, we are marching through a final stage of capitalism through a complicated process that can be defined as the phase of social media recuperation.

Social media assemble integrated tools of communication and cooperation within the commercialized web (or world) that can be used by anyone. The social media have changed the way typical mediated communications work. The conventional media ecology was disrupted irreversibly as radical media could be embedded to mainstream communication platforms.

There is a strange connection between counter cultural perspectives and social media. This stage interrelation is initially reflected by the permanent ambiguity regarding sovereignty and the internet structure that fluctuates between the concepts of centralised control capitalism and decentralized network democracy.

The influence of social media in contemporary society is an argument that has been bothering intensively for the last decades both the academic community and the world of politics. Hence, centralised platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr and so on, have been assumed to be in effect very important for the processes of individual and collective identities construction, for the genesis and maintenance of virtual communities as well as for the coordination of social movements.

Undoubtedly, innovations and new technologies always improve communication between people. Social media platforms offer advanced opportunities for multicultural international communications between



local radical activists setting a new framework for united international struggles that need common communication channels for global motivation against capitalism.

Contemporary information and political studies aroused questions about the possibilities of the networks to produce collective and connective action. Accordingly, new network technologies, may (or may not) determinedly lead to social action without necessarily requiring the preexistence of a collective identity (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, Castells 2012, Gerbaudo and Treré 2015, González-Bailón and Wang 2016).

One way or the other, the new media were broadly used by citizens in protest organization as free channels, transmitting messages and images without censoring by the states. However, the realization of the protests always took place in the streets with the physical interaction between people. After all, the concrete movements were actualized by people in the streets of Cairo (2011), Madrid (2011), Athens (2011), New York (2011) and many other places, where individual activists met and interacted face to face (Hardt and Negri 2017).

Additionally, someone could easily claim that social media have initiated a recuperation process that rearranges counter cultural emblems and anti-establishment slogans to appear like commercial advertising or comic posters.

Unfortunately, their user generated content in combination to their commercial orientation assemble heterogeneous portfolios that store up together the comic with the disastrous, the significant with the unimportant, the real with the fake, the moral with the corrupt, the public with the domestic, the political with the commercial and so on, bringing everything to an 'eternal, illusory party' (Ludovico and Cirio, 2013).

This condition certainly does not recall decentralized and secure communications systems that increase the opportunities for citizens to take part in public affairs. On the contrary, it constructs a mechanism that increases recuperation and apathy. As Morozov (2013) argues, it rather brings about passive states of participation such as 'solutionism', 'slacktivism' and 'armchair activism'.

Counter cultural images are posted to social media by a great number of individuals, with different aims that are connected to discrete social groups. This means that people with different directions, that are involved in diverse 'language-games' (Wittgenstein 1953) can use the same images to signify diverse concepts.

The meanings of the images in social media are flexible and can take many connotations depending on the profile and the social capital of the individual that makes them available publicly on the platform. In this sense, although nowadays there is a great diffusion of counter cultural visual emblems through social media, those emblems are loaded with multiple meanings and this fact finally neutralizes the original purpose of the prime symbolic connotation.

Eventually, it must be clear that social media are not public services or open communal spaces designed to advance social discourse, supporting civil society (Lovink and Rasch 2013; Seemann, 2014). Social

media do have embedded commercial politics as private corporations of the 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek, 2016) and unquestionably their basic objective is the sustenance of 'spectacle capitalism'.

Thus, in present-day terms social media target the endless accumulation of data by getting as many 'prosumers' (Toffler 1990) or 'producers' (Bruns 2008) as possible, supporting once more the commercialised economy as the only basis of the human civilization.

## **Conclusions**

In order to comprehend the consequences of the 'empire of illusion' (Hedges 2009) it requires a sufficient level of visual education. Visual critical pedagogy recognizes, analyzes and critiques how economic, political and social realities define and shape our perception of the world.

Additionally, visual education enhances critical consciousness and challenges students to analyze how values beliefs and knowledge are interrelated with issues of agency, politics and power (Tavin 2003).

Thus, if the investigation of counter cultural emblems constitutes an effective pedagogical tool for achieving emancipatory knowledge for social transformation, it should be broadly recognized as more than a way to explain the behaviour of counter cultural groups.

It has been said that the counter cultures perform an important task on behalf of the dominant culture, making it more flexible, through all these processes of resistance and recuperation. Art revolutions, counter cultural emblems or alternative life-styles never brought the system to its knees, on the other hand they always assisted for the revitalisation of the consumption (Clarke et al 2000: 65).

The dominant capitalist culture represents and reproduces itself continuously. In order to be updated, it defines, categorizes and intergrades all other cultures within its range. Mainstream culture stands as the most natural and universal worldview system, and this fact became even broader in the time of the social media. All other cultures must struggle to survive within it, to negotiate, to convive, to resist and in most cases to be assimilated.

Symbols of resistance after they become myths related to the values of counter cultures that represent are gradually removed from alternative media to mainstream channels.

Just as the original punk subculture was semantically neutralised and commodified by the culture industry, in the same way counter cultural processes and rituals such as tattooing, and graffiti have been invalidated and repackaged as new popular trends and fashion.

There is no doubt that trends and fashion are intertextual systems that sometimes may link products with counter cultural emblems. However, this process neutralises the original meaning of the emblems. Commodification brings everything into the context of commodity-form, in order to be exploited as a new source of investment.

On the other hand, recent research has shown that sometimes counter cultural emblems can coexist as symbols political resistance despite the commoditization without losing their political power.

Marketing managers realised that it is very easy to motivate the consumers by activating their covert sentiments of indignation and rebellion, using counter cultural emblems and codes of the apparent enemies of massive consumption.

Previously confrontational visual symbolisms such as spiked and mohawk hair, leather accessories, ripped clothing, tattoos and graffiti, instead of motivating offensive rebellion and transgression have been transformed to commodity codes signifying the stylish, the exciting and the spectacular, within the frameworks of conformity.

Digital technology and the new media communications intensify this process by making universally apparent the counter cultural emblems and by promoting further resistance as commodity, introducing everything to the exchange-value system in relation with all the other commodities. This process reduces the signified concept of rebellion to the act of consumerism.

The social media gave extensive potentialities to everyone for the recuperation process. Images of counter cultural emblems and rituals can be posted by anyone, they can get organised in groups, become marketable in t-shirts and stickers and select 'likes', totalizing the commodity culture by elevating the accumulation of digital databases.

Finally, depending on the profile and the social capital of the individual that makes images publicly available on the social media platforms, meanings can take various connotations reflecting each time the rhetoric of the addresser.

'The most modern aspect of the spectacle is also at bottom the most archaic' (Debord 1970). Representations in social media, counter cultural emblems and alternative mechanisms of communication are all subjected to 'reification' and 'recuperation' (Lukács 1923, Debord 1969), mixing radical struggles together with other commercial practices that belong to the sphere of 'Spectacle'.

The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence' (Debord 1970). Critical investigation of visual elements that are published in social media can release students from what the Situationists International considered as the passive culture of spectacle, towards more active 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972) and bring about possibilities for dynamic social engagements.

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## Pictures

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Picture 2. Top ten haircuts 2016, source: The toptenny <https://www.toptenny.com/top-10-hottest-haircuts-hairstyles-for-men-2016/>

Picture 3. The Ramones, source: The Ramones Will Get Their Own Street in Queens, N.Y. <https://www.spin.com/2016/10/the-ramones-way-queens/>

Picture 4. Comercial ripped jeans, source: carousell <https://ph.carousell.com/p/free-shipping-nation-wide-divided-by-h-m-original-ripped-jeans-for-women-promo-buy-one-pant-get-one-h-m-long-sleeve-shirt-for-free-103277467/>

Picture 5. Sex Pistols in the seventies, source: persimusic <https://persimusic.com/apendice-de-bandas/s-z/the-sex-pistols/>

- Picture 6. Virgin Money Debit Cards 2016, source: AdAge in 'Anarchy in the UK as Virgin Money Debites Sex Pistol Credit Card', <http://creativity-online.com/work/virgin-money-sex-pistols-credit-cards/42185>
- Picture 7. Tattoo: Les Skuse, Bristol, Great Britain, 1960s, source: Schiffmacher, Henk, and Burkhard Riemschneider, eds. 1000 Tattoos. Taschen, 2014. p.257
- Picture 8. Live Unbuttoned Levis 501, Josh Beech photographed by David Vasiljevic, source: The campaign: levi's spring/summer 2009 Porhome <http://porhomme.com/2009/02/the-campaign-levis-501-springsummer-2009/>
- Picture 9. Skinhead tattoo, source: Schiffmacher, Henk, and Burkhard Riemschneider, eds. 1000 Tattoos. Taschen, 2014. p. 477
- Picture 10. Lego tattoo campaign, source: Pilots extrafine, Lego tattoo campaign, Ads of the World, [https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/pilot\\_legoman\\_tattoo\\_full\\_body](https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/pilot_legoman_tattoo_full_body)
- Picture 11. Harley Davidson tattoo, source: <https://www.askideas.com/27-harley-tattoos-on-sleeve/>
- Picture 12. Corporate Logo Tattoos, source: Facebook - Laine Too <https://www.facebook.com/LaineToo/>
- Picture 13. Never Work, source: Marxist internet archive <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/1963/never-work.htm>
- Picture 14. Puma Graffiti on Canvas – Advertising production, source: Graffiti usa <https://www.graffiti-artist.net/advertisements/puma-suede-commercial/>
- Picture 15. Crass graffiti at Bond street station 1979 (Dial House Collection)
- Picture 16. Living in Harmony – Coca Cola, TATS CRU, Inc
- Picture 17. Saussure's two-sided sign, source: de Saussure F. (1916) Cours de linguistique générale. p. 158
- Picture 18. The diagram is made by the author on the basis of Saussure's two-sided sign diagram.