

Transgression in Contemporary Visual Communication

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Abstract: Relying on aesthetics, communication and art, this article seeks to make a theoretical and critical analysis of media industry's commands of transgression as a device of innovation think about new meanings and increase visual communication in the pop market culture. It is used in this article a theoretical framework whose epistemological basis was constructed from studies of social representations and technologies of domination, whose main theories are from Espinoza, Adorno, Marin, Klossowsky and Foucault. The movements of counter culture, especially in art and fashion, such as Dadaism and the punk movement have served as a source for a critical analysis of the operating approach of culture, imagination and industry. This approach operation is defined today as a repetitious layout of a marketing matrix within a transgressive culture particularly identified with the logic of the entertainment. Thus transgression entertainment became a constant in the media that conveys aesthetic in contemporaneity. It is possible to identify this phenomenon within the fashion system, arts and design, all ready to innovate in aesthetic standards in order to cope with an industry image that feeds itself from a planned transgression. Dramatic releases such as the singer Lady Gaga illustrate this thesis.

Key words: visual communication, design, fashion, transgression

1. Design and Cloistered

The industrial system and the consumption society are going through a moment of confrontation with its limits. Media technologies are capital motors in this process, particularly those that produce images or images that they convey. The contemporary approach of production and consumption, in a more general perspective, reveals how one of its intrinsic logic, transfers and replacements production for the body and the imaginary apace, producing a constant emptying and resetting of senses, generating an eternal body consumer, to be filled by ephemeral objects-signs. The author of *Lamonnaievivante*, Pierre Klossowsky (1997) states that there is an exploitation relationship of consumerism between the ghost (fantasy) and the industry. According to this author, we possess by nature an instinct of propagation (fusion) a drive state that instead of taking us to individuality, leads us to its opposite state, the multiple, the collective.

This logic demonstrates a perverse dynamic of a systemic production of confinement and openings, transforming every new possibility in merchandise (material or immaterial), in the time and space of satisfaction. The access to that satisfaction is constituted as a filtering system of socio-economic strata, revealing a dynamic between forces and interests, between abundance and lack, designing, ultimately, the hierarchical architecture of society. Thus, to rescue the social dimension of design and consequently of fashion, either by questioning image

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making and its operating system, or by questioning objects as media agents, it is essential in the perspective of knowledge development about communication processes and the collective dimension .

Contemporary perception and relationship with objects and phenomena of mass, particularly the expanded media technologies, enable us to identify some fields and strategies that enhance *ailment* awareness and collective behaviors. We realize that culture acts in this process as a privileged field of media actions and image construction is a fundamental strategy adopted in this context. From culture is possible to interfere in other important aspects of society, such as politics and economics.

Culture, and within it, Fashion, Art and Design, by filling our imagination and by changing our perception of the world, leads us to define new layouts, patterns, and of course, new manners, production and consumption. However, in the case of post-modern culture, one realizes that there is on the one hand the effect generated by the industrial system crisis, by the way, entropic effects of values, saturation of markets and on the other hand, the need to continue the economic system itself to develop, that is, to create, to produce new markets. Between these two poles there are consumers and citizens whom ultimately, are the ones who hold the power to decide what they will consume and how to select product-value.

It sets a permanent battle to build new symbolic and pragmatic frameworks that can promote new layouts of consumption and also of production. It is in this perspective that we see the problem of image, visual communication and its dynamics in fashion and design: a visual communication as a means of generating directions affecting the spheres mediators between man and the world; one could say a fundamental symbolic dimension that gives sense in situations that are more profound and in subtle bodies of the individual. In general, visual communication offers us the image itself that serves as a reference for defining postmodernity.

The cultural layout of a mass consumer society rescues values that show a social order in which the idols of the media become ghostly beings, bearers of a symbolic nature easily merchandised, allowing them a lifestyle that replicates an attractive prospect, serving as a producer device of delusions and as catharsis for all consumers. The permanent devouring, sort of a cannibalistic movement, of those idols, images and models of consumerism and its replacement with new images, recovered in the banned and innovative orders of transgression, are part of a dynamic that establishes a permanent sense of possible movement, exchanges and chained achievements in a process of talents and skills recognition. This process, in its deeper perspective protects an evil order of constant submission to a specific way of consumption and production, attributed values of an affirmative order of the underlying structures of capitalism.

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the immanent processes of an order that pervades structures between both the economic and symbolic, particularly through visual communication, affecting culture as a whole, sometimes trespassing, sometimes assimilating. Therefore, we question and we are trying to reveal evidence about the transformation of a new subject/object relationship in contemporaneity, media and mass communication effect, giving rise to the problem of values and beliefs that nourish and sustain the order of forms produced and consumed in a show off society. A kind of imagistic and visual orchestration, thus satisfying the deeper dynamics of capitalism: social stratification, capital accumulation, and a constant controlled tension, as Foucault would say a “permanent peace” (1997).

Thus, the image encoding symbolic values in the object to be consumed, one could say merchandise, whether a product, a piece of art, or design objects, in each intensive displacement, gives birth again in a given desirable order. In this scroll, possible folds in the established values will be revealed, expanding or contracting, finally, projecting beyond a banal everyday existential condition of a community in permanent transformation in the

pursuit of satisfaction.

2. Devices Symbolic Construction: The Legacies of the Show

Every era and its culture develop its proper set of construction and symbolic legitimacy devices. Fashion alone, particularly in our Western culture, is part of that set of devices. Its purpose is essentially introducing new meanings, making visible and imprint other possible forms of representations, enabling thus the dynamics of consumption through an identity, that can be significant through the objects and it is on a continuous process of affirmation and rupture.

Be it on Duchamp's work, Philippe Starck or Lady Gaga, we can identify a dynamic strongly associated with entertainment. What art used to associate with transgression and ephemerality, incidentally, a long for innovation and disruption; we perceive it nowadays replicated on the horizon of cultural industry products. Cultural industry, as Adorno says, it gives to everything a certain similarity. The criteria for selection are defined "from the specific weight of the technical equipment and the personnel who should, however, be understood in its smallest details, as a part of the economic mechanism of selection" (Adorno, 1985, p. 115). In particular the institutions of art, even under pressure from internal agents to the system itself, to the same extent as they welcomed and legitimized as an art objectone *Urinol*¹, made explicit the possibility of transforming the conception limits of the patrimonial goods of the institution, and thus ensured its continuity in the hierarchical power of the agents who define what art is and what is not. It was revealed in this dynamic the integration capacity by institutional machinery through its operators, from the different, from the transgressor, from the exogenous element. Allowing him at worst, an update regarding the emerging values in society. As the institutions of art have become and welcomed the transgressions of Duchamp, the industrial system is now ready to welcome the transgressions of Lady Gaga broadening our spectrum of stereotypes to be consumed.

Innovation, but at the same time the permanence of a given order — production of wealth and control — perhaps the prime engine that allows both the dynamics of an art institution as the industrial system that search for what is different and catches the new. Seeking new aesthetics, that in the end are merchandise, stereotypes prêt-à-porter, and masks of representation to be consumed by a particular group. On that dynamic it is revealed both a logic that incorporates the new, the different, the possible "destabilizing" agent provocateur, new intensities and displacements of meaning, as the possibility of remaining in an active place of that who gives value, of that who establishes a definition, a cut through and affirms a given order, of that who produces and releases a sense. It turns out, that this way shows the dynamics of cultural innovation process.

Indeed, the potential membrane of production system, be it fashion, art or design, have varying thicknesses and are defined by a complexity of agents, among them, the identified and selected ones by the interests of the capital and symbolic production. The stability of these membranes and their balance, their permanence or rupture depends on its plasticity and ability to incorporate, sorting, filtering the new *antigens* that emerge from social tensions and productions of the immanent between new technologies and the transgressive potential, finally, the dynamics of rupture an emerging culture in continuous production process of satisfaction.

In order to analyze the assimilation of the *transgressive* act as a device that operates in meaning production for the new, we should address for a moment our attention to the art system and to the logic based by the great salons of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The dynamics proposed by major art exhibitions, back then in

¹In original French: *La Fontaine* de Marcel Duchamp, 1917.

Paris, most famous by its power of legitimating or rejecting, they function in the tension between the new and the traditional, between the old and new canons and amazing aesthetics. It is clear in the case of the Impressionists when held an exhibition of rejected works from the Official Salon in the late nineteenth century and managed to assert themselves as an aesthetic movement whose value today is easily recognized by the public. But at the time, the degree of haughtiness and criticism provoke a nonconformist reaction from the artists. They claimed the aesthetic value of their work, in the Hall of Tailings, an independent and transgressive show exposing what the art *mainstream* has refused.

The success of this venture was due particularly to the structure of the action in a network between artists and other promoters of information and knowledge, incidentally, media players, such as the photographer Nadar. This event led to cracks in the hegemonic dynamics of official devices to legitimize the works' values. It is notorious that the effective mobilization of artists *makes history* a part from the hegemonic aesthetic values and standards of academies, in a sense, quite revealing in the field of micro art, as Foucault says (2008). That experience revealed that the scenario (the market) is a much more malleable and amenable field of transformation, of what it was assumed, revealing inside fighting forces, clash of values and interests, exposing the specter of power in every dimension of chain production of the art object's value.

More broadly, we can see that this logic of production of cultural goods is not free of ideology, defining a given relationship with property, with sovereignty and land, finally with the socio-economic relations that are established. In fact the procedural structure with respect to the symbolic power remains the same: the establishment of an "inside" and an "outside", recovering a well-known model of power, which is the king and his court, as stated by Louis Marin in *Le portrait du roi* (1981).

The legitimation process is not simple, and dispute involves power relations reaching a final stage trimming required, of definition of a select group, of a soon-artist, of its objects-signs validated through the seal of the institution, be it the representation of the king, of the art dealer, of the company, ultimately, of an Maecena. We must consider this logic involving artist — institution — institutional power, as a systemic whole, resulting in defining action of a state representation to be experienced and consumed aesthetically by the general public.

It is understood that the show does not take place alone, in contrast, entails a complex network that leverages, the symbolic point of view and also economical, not only exhibits, but its universe of social relations. In this sense we can see that large biennials such as the one in Venice, or mega-shows such as Lady Gaga's, tend to produce a set of *ad hoc* elements conducive not only to artists and actors involved, but everyone who is part of a socio-economic and symbolic network of that company or of that *existential territory*. The logic that unfolds in those events is not just about the human expression of its ideas, but also the material conditions of its existence.

The process of legitimation of an artist and his or her work is quite complex, involving regular and clear criteria and strategies in some aspects, however, difficult to define in some others, often tangential to the world of passions and personal relationships. Using the logic of sad passions and joyful passions of Spinoza's Political Treatise, we emphasize that a body performs effort to reach a state of pleasure in its existence — *conatus* — and this body in its relationship with other bodies, can produce either composition or annihilation. Any object, an image, in all its complexity, including its features legitimation, metaphorically as a body, is permanently in a balance of power with other bodies. So the bottom line that originates from Spinoza's thought is: What this body, in other words, what can this culture object, whether fashion, show, etc. be capable of? Answering this question involves the perception of the degree of power that body, both in the sense of object that suffer diseases such as in the sense of object that produces disorders on other bodies. An object placed in the world produces aesthetic

effects that generate a range of shifts in feelings and perceptions, which may tear or recompose the dominant principle of reality. It may, accordingly, establish a cultural innovation.

The consumer experience of an object, a transgressive image, whether for fashion, art or by design, leaves its mark, affects us, allowing us a repositioning towards the reality with which we interact. Roughly speaking, it is capable of producing new logics that trigger sensitive young strata; it may change our relationship with time and space with the objects and bodies. The transgressive experience allows us to experiment with a new aesthetic-spatial temporality, and that another order of materiality can tout sensations beyond the limits established socially stimulating the new conditions, thus interfering with the generation of new meanings and identities. Thus, we can say that art, fashion and design, the horizon of visual communication, allows us to adapt or tension senses, and can produce feelings of displacement of individuals, thereby allowing, new experiences and cultural innovations.

3. Transgression as Reframing Mechanism

Transgression in the universe of symbolic goods is characterized as a mechanism for reconsidering languages, working on implementing new standards as formal-aesthetic movements of rupture that can be pre-orchestrated. That operation is visible mainly from the second half of the twentieth century with the advent of the counterculture and the breaking of social paradigms, cultural and behavioral, supporting a status quo that comes from a legitimization of differences as a means of demonstrating the limits of defense. The reframing device then eventually legitimize representative languages that were quickly assimilated by the spheres of consumption, providing systems — Fashion and Art, mostly — forms of acceleration and renewal. Watching the assemblage of new production technologies for industrial goods and the opening of new markets from the 50s, there was a new generation of public consumer, evidencing requirements concerning the characterization of the individual in society and in circumscribed groups to specific groups, presenting new ways for the provision of cultural goods.

According to Foucault, the idea that is about the limit and transgression (thus generating a dichotomy), is not the prerogative of central transgression. There is a relation between these principles, but this is a relationship that is founded by complementation. Thus, transgression is not about “a general denial but an affirmation that affirms nothing: in the rupture moment of transitivity. The defense is not the effort of thought to deny stocks or securities, is the gesture which brings each of them to their limits [...]. There, on the transgressed limit, resonates the yes.” (Foucault, 2006, p. 34)

According to the author, transgression generates contestation of established symbolic patterns and eventually breaks with potential limits, working to establish new limits from the transgressive act itself. Thus, one can understand that the tensions generated by the limits existence and transgression of them, aims rearrange prospects, starting from the basis that the end of existing limits brings new codes that can generate meanings yet not known or evaluated. Thus, the role of transgression lies in the establishment of new signs or rearrangements of code — correspond to the dynamics of break with the prevailing discourse, establishing from that appropriate outlook configuration speeches till then unknown: “The new arrangement is not in the speech, but in the event of its return.” (Foucault, 2008, p. 28.).

To exemplify this perspective, one can cite a case in the field of Fashion and Art: Anti-Art according to the *Dada* movement and Anti-Fashion according to the Punk movement. In both cases, the constituent signs of representation — works of art to the Dadaists, and clothing, for the punks served to communicate the content of

subversion that underlay aesthetic, moral and behavioral precepts. Each movement sought, in its own way, to bring up ruptures with different sociocultural aspects, leaving the scandal to operate such a perspective. This scandal, according to Benjamin (1994) may be associated with the distraction factor, which eventually became operative logic in the field of art with the advent of mechanical reproduction. The distraction was thus incorporated in a timely manner by the Dadaists, and its practice is likely to be recognizable among the fundamental principles of the Punk movement. Benjamin, with respect to the Dada movement, said that “attractive spectacle for the eyes and seductive to the ear, the work became into a shot. Reached through aggression the viewer.” (Benjamin, 1994, p. 191)

However, the Anti-Fashion on the Punk movement also ended up serving as a means of arousing indignation among those who did not recognize themselves through the signs of the defense motion. One of the most effective mechanisms for such practice was characterized by the clothing created by punks. The objects of clothing — later artifacts incorporated into the fashion field — were mostly composed of materials from industrial and urban waste. This way of uniting elements demonstrated the need for these individuals to subvert aesthetic, formal and prevailing moral values, shocking by the elements used to compose objects within a social context.

However, the form of symbolic representation that the Punk movement became known in the Western world was the music, with an aesthetic characterized by sartorial an assumption a posteriori. According to Galvão and Kastilhos “intending to reverse the values of the ruling elites, the punks instead of presenting themselves on stage [...] mingled with the audience, and instead of playing and singing, shouting, spitting and desecrated religious imagery of that culture” (Galvão & Kastilhos, 2003, p. 185).

Six decades separate the movements, however, the principle of transgression, operated through the perspective of subversion for some existing values, whether in the arts, in the social environment, to finally achieve fashion, manifests with the same force. In this sense, the offending character of each movement has its heart on social issues, linking macro and micro-environmental factors that modified accepted cultural standards, leading to an understanding of the importance of transgression as a principle of transformation and aggregation among individuals.

4. Transgression as a Factor of Aggregation

However, if the offense can operate as a factor of association between individuals, it means that its operating character allows the understanding of socio-cultural aspects which contribute to the need to break boundaries. In this sense, allows us to question the importance of this dynamic for the fields of design and consumption of symbolic goods. In the case of the Dadaists, so the factor of transgression operated from subversion was grounded in the perspective of making tangible dissatisfaction with the social, economic and governmental policies of the period after 1st World War, focusing on ending the throes and moral delusions of that period. The political, religious and artistic institutions were questioned about their sociocultural and economic role.

On the other hand punks sought to materialize their indignation with the existing political, economic and social system in the 1970s, first in some northern hemisphere countries, more precisely, on British soil. Thus, aesthetics play through the clothing and items such as makeup, haircut, etc., enabled the recognition of a particular social class condition being less privileged. According to Morais and Portinari:

“The lack of future, hopelessness, unemployment, inhospitable living conditions, the policy of privatization of Thatcher, among other factors that deposed the good of the public services available to them, did these young,

mostly coming from worker classes from the suburbs, establish around a store sadomasochistic articles, situated in a region that lacked prosperity than other regions of Chelsea offered, sociability places where they could subvert, externalize their sense of stagnation and social exile.” (Morais & Portinari, 2006, p. 81).

Therefore, the transformations and conditions inherent to the social environment in both periods has generated artifacts aimed at expressing dissatisfaction with the content of various sociocultural aspects — concerning therefore the environment that surrounded them in each period. To transgress the limits set, it proves to be a defense mechanism of these aspects, materializing the prospect of subversion in different platforms of expression of subjectivities. Breaking paradigms established from this dynamic, signifying possible reorganizations, allowing the assimilation of codes opened by every movement, whether in art or fashion.

In this sense, on the fashion field this practice allowed the configuration of unpublished interpretations, aiming recode codes relating to language punk subversion in order to offer other formalizations devoid of the original meaning. The transgressive act found limits, and the limits allowed rearrangements due to the diffusion of representative languages provided by the fashion system in the name of survival of the same.



Figure 1 Seditious Collection Vivienne Westwood, 1976



Figure 2 Look Zandra Rhodes launched in 1977

Source: DE LA HAYE and MENDES, 2003, pp. 225; 227

The related image Seditious Collection (1976), fashion design of the English designer Vivienne Westwood, shows the first representations of artifacts in subversion punk fashion. On the other hand the image of Zandra Rhodes, illustrates how the codes communicated by the punk movement were being reinterpreted, serving to reframe articles targeted to a select circle of users of international haute couture. The example serves to demonstrate the use and ownership of transgression as the operating mechanism of sign renewal in the field of fashion. In this context, one can see that the system is used by the prospect of breaking boundaries in order to leverage new interpretative arrangements, serving as mechanisms for the renewal of practices inherent to the field.

5. Transgression as a Distraction

By approximation, transgression, who is the operator for the consumption of symbolic goods trendy device, can also act as a distraction factor, in the sense proposed by Benjamin (1994). According to the author, the distraction is in a posture of entertainment across the artwork. However, by analogy to works of art, taking a stand against entertainment supposedly transgressive artifacts, it is shown, in the limit, as the emulation contestatory dimension inherent to transgressivity. However, in its radicalism, such defense is non-existent, since the result — encoded as a distraction — it's socially expected, being associated with the dynamic spectacle of individual expression.

Thus distraction has an effect from the scandal, mingling with the fact of transgressing limits. It is expected from this practice to obtain languages renewal cyclically, and these cycles correspond — on the current logic — to the increasingly shorter marketing moments. In this sense, shows operate in the fashion system and consequently in society, by distractions also produced cyclically. However, the expression assumed by some contemporary iconic figures illustrates this practice, as the exemplary case of the singer and performer Lady Gaga.

The aesthetic associated with this singer offers us substrate to question the matrix underlying communication, possibly conceptualized as anachronistic cultural bricolage, typical of *kitsch* images of postmodernity. Showing means for transgression senses emulation, which are of the imaginary underground order, the persona works as an image built for symbolic aggregation and collective desires and fantasies emulation. Feeding with its image a sociocultural dynamic of constant renewal subversive codes, thus Lady Gaga eventually end up satisfying the producing industry technologically prepared to associate these images to the products that will be consumed by visual culture, fashion, arts, by design as a gender of *prêt-à-porter* transgression.

In fact the singer Lady Gaga² with her provocative and erotic images, produces a sense of order effects of distraction. Replicating thus the operational perspective of cultural industries, whose dynamics is combined with diffusion devices, media capable of designing models and icons, ghostly images constructed in the minds of social collectives. The argument advanced is that Persona Gaga, this phantasmal image and mediated by mass communication devices, functions as a field attracting the imaginary desiring. Each one seeking on the stereotypes of that Persona the possible to transpose the limits imposed by the formalization of everyday life, to add to its personal performance indications of transgression likely to be recognized as an identity resonating with the urban collectives.

This perspective has a foundation in the arguments voiced by the sociologist Mafesolli, who understands that building a Persona ultimately unify various wills, to allow the experience of actions and retroactions between individuals in the social field. According to the sociologist:

The man is no longer considered in isolation. And even when we admit [...], the preponderance of the imaginary, we must not forget that it results from a social body and, in return, back to materialize it. This is not exactly self-sufficiency, but constant feedback. The whole mental life is born of a relationship and your game actions and retroactions (Mafesolli, 2002, p. 104).

Therefore Lady Gaga's Persona is capable of aggregating, attract to its attractor field, a latent need for transgression of a multiplicity of individual sanonymous in society. It helps with its set of images, all which can be operated by industry and the market for building identities in urban mass, enabling aesthetic formalization

²American pop singer, whose original name is Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, (Lady Gaga) was born on March 28, 1986 in

through costumes.

This perspective ultimately serves to the established systems of cultural industry, such as musical, which recognize the importance of aggregating agent of collective wills — Lady Gaga — Persona and transform this into a broad platform for the development of marketing strategies, aimed at mass distraction.

6. Final Thoughts

The cultural industry, and consequently fashion, with its constant need for the new, in order to seek out the breakdowns of market, border closures and the system itself, creates innovative devices whose dynamics by analogy identifies with performative action and transgressive known in the art. Indeed transgression was adopted as a means to operate in accordance breaks of the established ways.

In this sense, the objective is the creation and delivery of media images that can function as attracting fields, adding sense in particular contexts of formalization. Generating through the use of these images, emulations senses and sublimation of desire, opening conditions to add value in the collective imagination to objects produced by industry. Thus, the phantasmagorical projections of a collective over a given form, the culture industry finds a *modus operandi*, allowing further manipulation and assimilation of values. This perspective contributed to the setting of Persona Lady Gaga, whose overall image is constituted by various cultural fragments, widely satisfying the imagination of a collective of urban consumers, allowing us to question the future of aesthetics in postmodern culture. Would we be witnessing, through transgression as an operator for consuming images that reflect an affirmation of the Dionysian, the grotesque, ultimately, the post-industrial baroque, contemporary culture?

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