Analyzing Banksy's *Napalm* (2004):

Exploring the Aesthetics and Ideology of Post-Modernism as Demonstrated Through Graffiti Art Work

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Banksy (2005) states:

> People are taking the piss out of you everyday. They butt into your life, take a cheap shot at you and then disappear. They leer at you from tall buildings and make you feel small. They make flippant comments from buses that imply you're not sexy enough and that all the fun is happening somewhere else. They are on TV making your girlfriend feel inadequate. They have access to the most sophisticated technology the world has ever seen and they bully you with it. They are The Advertisers and they are laughing at you. (p. 31)

British graffiti artist known simply as Banksy engages with The Advertisers through a rapidly growing artistic repertoire. As a subversive, London-based street artist, Banksy employs a guerilla art practice to visually analyze a contemporary global community through the interplay of aesthetics and ideology. Through this interaction, Bansky strives to reclaim public spaces by changing their dynamics with images or counter images, leaving his politically charged art anonymously on walls in and around London proper. Banksy's images range in content yet a majority of these works speak with what Rampley (2005a, p. 134) calls visual rhetoric, achieving a response from the viewer. Rampley writes, "within Western culture visual art has long been regarded as a rhetorical practice, concerned with narrative and with persuading and moving its audience" (p. 134). Banksy utilizes this visual communication and representation as a vehicle of persuasion to move his audience. The narratives talk about political ideologies, which Banksy humorously infuses with tones of sarcasm and irony. From the oversized rats, which run rampant through the streets of London to the more culturally controversial depictions of lip-locked English police officers, Banksy exploits a consumer culture (Duncum, 2005, p. 15) created by The Advertisers. More specifically, exploitation in regards to what Duncum refers to as the excessiveness of the, "visual culture of corporate capitalism" (p. 9). This exploitation is clearly exemplified in Banksy's screen-print entitled *Napalm* (2004), reproduced in figure 1.1.

Banksy targets the corporate caricatures of Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald by commenting on what Duncum calls "the consumer body" (2005, p. 41). In *Napalm*, there exists

a visual rhetoric (Rampley, 2005) that speaks about a consumer culture where the emphasis is no longer on the production of goods but rather their consumption (Duncum, p. 15). In the 2004 work, the image of a young, Vietnamese girl running naked through the street as a result of the combat during the conflict in Vietnam is appropriated from the infamous original 1972 photograph by Nick Ut. The victim, now extracted from her original context, is juxtaposed between the corporate faces of Walt Disney and McDonalds. Through both Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald, each who represent their respective corporations, Banksy manipulates the aesthetics and ideology of the image at the juncture of consumer capitalism and democratic idealism. Utilizing a guerilla tactic Banksy flips the direction of laughter from the consumer directly back at The Advertisers and thus revealing the thread of irony. Ultimately, Banksy achieves this by directly assaulting the viewers' senses through the interplay of aesthetics with ideology.

Figure 1.1
Napalm
(Banksy, 2004)

The terms aesthetic and ideology have both undergone significant changes in meaning as a result of the shift from 18th century early modernist connotations to the post-modern interpretations. The post-modern definition, "from which our word *aesthetics* is derived, to mean sense perception," originates from "the ancient Greek sense of *aesthesis*" (Duncum, 2008, p. 124). Duncum writes, "aesthesis is an inclusive concept that incorporates all visual perception and effects, not just the beautiful and the sublime and their appreciation, but also the unpleasant, the crude and rude and their effects upon us" (p. 124). By employing the Greek *aesthesis* to

discuss aesthetics in a post-modern world, one moves away from the modernist tradition "founded as it was on the deliberate suppression of the body and the privileging of mindful activity" (Duncum, p. 124). This post-modern definition of aesthetics therefore, "flies in the face of the Kantian tradition, which seeks to separate out aesthetics from ethics" (Duncum, 2007, p. 288). Sturken & Cartwright (2001) write:

> Kant believed that pure beauty could be found in nature and art, and that it is universal rather than specific to particular cultural or individual codes. In other words, he felt that certain things inevitably and objectively are beautiful. Today, however, the idea of aesthetics has moved away from the belief that beauty resides within a particular object or image. We no longer think of beauty as a universally accepted set of qualities. Contemporary concepts of aesthetics emphasize the ways that the criteria for what is beautiful and what is not are based on taste, which is not innate but rather culturally specific. (p. 48)

Historically, the modernist interpretation of aesthetics "represents a denial of the body," thereby elevating the mind as summarized by Descartes' credo, "I am thinking, therefore I am" (Duncum, 2005, p. 10). During the 18th century Alexander Baumgarten furthered Descartes mind/body dualism by bringing, "what he called the 'the sensuous discourse' of aesthetics into being as a separate and distinct branch of philosophy" (Duncum, 2005, p. 10). Duncum writes, Baumgarten believed "the world could be understood principally through internal workings of the mind, but reasoning showed him the importance of feelings, imagination and sensory experience" (2007, p. 11). And, although Baumgarten "rescued the term *aesthetics* from antiquity," he also made a distinction of the senses into those that were, "worthy or unworthy of study" (Dunucm, 2007, p. 11). The division of the worthy and unworthy is today echoed in the

distinctions between images constructed for fine art with those constructed for popular culture, or in other words high verses low culture (Rampley, 2005).

Culture is a complex idea debated and discussed throughout history originating from the Latin *cultura* (Rampley, 2005b, p. 5). Rampley writes, "*Cultura* originally denoted the cultivation of nature," (p. 6) however now in the post-modern sense "has come to denote not merely the process of individual and social development, but also the things a society has produced" (p. 8). These socially produced things create a "complex set of social expectations and values," which include culturally shaped ideologies (Rampley, p. 10).

In the post-modern context ideology is used "in the now common, general sense of characterizing ideas, ideals, beliefs, and values" (Duncum, 2008, p. 125). Duncum (2008) writes:

> Among other means, ideology is expressed through cultural sign systems that are constitutive of social practice; ideology informs the way people act in the world and the way people act in turn tends to justify and reinforce ideology. In this sense all practice is ideological because all our daily activities are informed by some sense of their purpose. Employing this use of ideology, we see visual culture saturated with symbolic meanings that reveal the hopes, fears, expectations, certainties, uncertainties, and ambiguities of our lives. By mean of images we engage with widely shared social assumptions about the way the world is, should be or should not be; in short, images offer models of the world that are either descriptive, prescriptive, or proscriptive. (p. 126)

For example, in Banksy's *Napalm* several ideologies are present in the image, the first and foremost being a critique of capitalism. Banksy critiques capitalist ethics and intentions through what Manga refers to as, "enacting a symbolic inversion" (2003, p. 162). Manga (2003) writes:

> Symbolic inversion can be understood as a cultural process through which any act of expressive behavior… inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, artistic, religious, social, or political. (p. 162)

In *Napalm* Banksy enacts symbolic inversions by means of an aesthetic juxtaposition of good and evil, which clash at the juncture of consumer capitalism and democratic idealism. The blankly smiling corporate mascots represent ideological sites of excessiveness associated with childhood innocence. However, now these corporate logos are inverted and hold hands with the visual embodiment of the destructive effects of warfare. In this image the girl becomes symbolic of anti-democratic ideals, and, as she holds the hands of Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald they become her accomplices—her corporate partners in crime. The impact of this inversion is further heightened by the overlap of ideology with Banksy's aesthetic choices.

Ideologies are dependant "upon the contexts in which it is viewed, the codes that prevail in a society, and the viewer who is making that judgment" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 48). By employing the Greek definition of aesthetics, one can identify the ideology in *Napalm* as a critique of, "the conditions of designer capitalism" (Duncum, 2007, p. 287). Vision defined by Rose as, "what the human eye is physiologically capable of seeing" speaks about the aesthetics of an image—black and white, cartoon and realistic (p. 6). The vision (Rose, 2007, p. 6) is achieved through the juxtaposition of the naked female body that runs screaming hand-in-hand with Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald. Ideologically, the mouse and clown symbolize an agreeable experience where as the girl represents the unpleasant. For instance, Mickey Mouse is a symbol for the Walt Disney Corporation part of which includes a number of theme parks such as Disneyland in California, known as "the happiest place on earth." Similarly, Ronald

McDonald physically embodies the McDonalds corporate ideology with a smile that says, "I'm loving it!" This interplay of aesthetics with ideology creates a tension that is further heightened through "an aesthetics of embodiment" (Duncum, 2005, p. 9).

Embodiment as defined by Duncum, "refers to the perceptual experience and [a] mode of presence and engagement with the world" (2007, p. 9). With embodiment there exists, "an appeal straight to the central nervous system," which includes an appeal to the visceral and vulgar (Duncum, 2005, p. 9). In *Napalm*, this embodiment harkens back to the cultural practices associated with the medieval carnival (Duncum & Springgay, 2007). Duncum & Springgay explain how, "medieval carnivals embraced ritual spectacles" which included the vulgar and grotesque body (p. 1145). Langman writes, the "carnival is a time of ironic inversions and reversals of the 'normal' hierarchies" (2003, p. 78). This inversion of "normal" hierarchies is evident in Banksy's *Napalm*. The artist juxtaposes Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald, symbols that represent notions of happiness, excessiveness, and gluttony, with the jarring image of the young female that symbolizes the effects of the evils of warfare. This juxtaposition is a visual reversal of "normal" societal ideas where these characters no longer represent happiness and innocence but hold the hands of evil, both literally and figuratively.

Moreover, the carnival body as defined by Bakhtin is, "bulging, protuberant, and complete with emphasis on the openings and orifices" (Duncum & Springgay, 2007, p. 1145). This carnivelesque body is clearly evident in *Napalm,* where Bansky deliberately selected the violent image of a victim whose body language and expression communicate her shear anguish—the torment of her burning flesh. It is an example of what Bakhtin regards as an *open* or *extreme* body within the history of fine art (Duncum, & Springgay, p. 1143). This *extreme* body according to Duncum & Springgay is, "leaky and visceral, an image of extreme pain and

wounding" (p. 1143). The classic art body, which embodied beauty and the sublime, is noticeably absent and instead the viewer is presented with, "an image of extreme pain" (Duncum & Springgay, p. 1143).

Banksy's *Napalm*, embraces the vulgar and carnivelesque in a manner which echoes another historic practice known as, "the archetypal 'cabinet of curiosity' or *Wunderkammer*" (Duncum & Springgay, 2007, p. 1144). Duncum & Springgay (2007) write that:

> The "cabinets of curiosity" functioned as a disordered jumble of unconnected objects, many of which were body parts or objects identified with bodies and identities. The cabinets functioned to present and represent knowledge of the world. Their allure was in displaying "the extreme" in a civilized and controlled environment, thereby ensuring domination over the objects (and the bodies they represented) while simultaneously privileging the strange(r) as the exotic other. (p. 1144)

In the case of *Napalm,* Banksy revisits the *Wunderkammer*. The image presents worldly knowledge, specifically ideologies about the horrors of warfare in juncture with the most recognizable faces of capitalism. Banksy's *Napalm* creates a display of "the extreme," through a controlled art environment.

In Banksy's *Napalm*, the initial draw is based purely on the vision of the artwork—the aesthetics. However, what keeps the viewer engaged is the scopic regime—the visuality of "how we are able, allowed, or made to see" (Rose, 2007. p. 6). As defined by Rose, visuality "refers to the ways in which both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed," (p.6) or in other terms refers to the culturally constructed ideologies. The ideologies depicted in *Napalm* create a response from the viewer through the use of aesthetics. Banksy's *Napalm* is a clear example of how images utilize the language of visual rhetoric to create a commentary about the

world. In an image, aesthetics help inform ideologies by visually strengthening the unspoken messages. The two concepts are continually informing one another to create a high impact visual image. The relationship between aesthetics and ideology is symbiotic in nature where one could not exist without the other.

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Figures

Figure 1.1—*Napalm* (2004). www.banksy.co.uk/ February 20, 2009.