CONFLUENZE
RIVISTA DI STUDI IBEROAMERICANI

The Power of a Poster: Analysis of Political Posters as Strategic Communication Tools in Latin America and Beyond

Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

ABSTRACT

This article analyses political posters from the 1960s to the 1990s in Latin America, uncovered by the exhibition Thinking Inside the Box, as a Strategic Communications tool. A discussion of visual communications theory summarises that the relevance of posters is not only in their message but in what they represent as a mean of communication. A history of their usage, production and consumption is then connected to dictatorships in Latin America in the 20th century, concluding that posters played a pivotal role as manifestations of power and recruitment tools in this historical period.

Keywords: Strategic Visuals, Latin America History, Political Communication, Thinking Inside the Box, Strategic Communication.

Questo articolo analizza i manifesti politici dal 1960 al 1990 in America Latina, presentati dalla mostra Thinking Inside the Box, come strumento di comunicazione strategica. Una discussione sulla teoria della comunicazione visiva sintetizza che la rilevanza dei manifesti non risiede solo nel loro messaggio, ma anche in ciò che rappresentano come mezzo di comunicazione. La storia del loro utilizzo, produzione e consumo viene quindi collegata alle dittature dell'America Latina nel XX secolo, concludendo che i manifesti hanno svolto un ruolo fondamentale come manifestazioni di potere e strumenti di reclutamento in questo periodo storico.

Parole chiave: Immagini strategiche, Storia Latinoamericana, Comunicazione politica, Thinking Inside the Box, Comunicazione strategica.

CONFLUENZE Vol. XVII, No. 2, 2025, pp. 405-430, ISSN 2036-0967, DOI: https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.2036-0967/20663, Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Moderne, Università di Bologna.

Introduction

Today, Strategic Communications can take multiple forms. From words to actions to visuals, Strategic Communications uses a variety of tools, always with the aim of influencing the target audience (Farwell, 2012). Messages can be promoted by a single image or single word, but the interplay of the two has a unique quality. Posters, as a cross between the visual and the written, form an opportunity for individuals to share their thoughts, for entities to strategically spread political messages and for organisations to draw attention to their cause. But can posters strategically communicate and what kind of power do posters possess to engage with their target audience?

These questions acted as guiding principles for the project 'Thinking Inside the Box' at King's College London (KCL). This project was created as a mechanism to explore University of London's Senate House Library collection of Latin American political posters and pamphlets dating from the 1960s-1990s. The creators of these materials range from political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other individuals. The expansive nature and tone of imagery from hand drawn rainbows to caricatures and visuals of torture, all beg one to question the different motivations behind creating these posters and their tactical purpose.

In the first section, Strategic Communications will be defined, arguing that not only should visual arts be considered in the field, but that Strategic Communications itself is in fact an art form. Following this, a brief history of posters will be given, focussing on the revolution of posters as means of Strategic Communications. Emerging from necessity and erupting social changes in Latin America, posters formed a way to communicate and spread messages visually. This article goes on to claim that posters are therefore a democratic medium, physical objects that infiltrate themselves into everyday life while necessitating direct engagement. Analysing the production process of posters, the political context in South America between 1960 and 1980 will be established, during which the posters were produced. The article further continues to discuss the rise of posters as visual storytellers, enabled by the beginning of the twentieth century and the possibility of mass production. This made posters a valuable tool for social movements, being able to spread their messages while controlling the transmitter. In the face of state terrorism, posters can serve as a display of authority. Finally, this paper will look at how posters have become commercialised. Using the example of Che Guevarra it will be explained how posters ultimately contribute to the preservation of Latin American political images.

Strategic Communications as an Art and Visual Communications Theory

The discipline of Strategic Communications expands over multiple areas, ranging from the private sector, such as marketing, to the public sector with diplomacy, and some overlapping areas such as public relations. Given its several applications, Strategic Communications has a myriad of definitions from different authors and fields.

Emma Christensen and Lars Thøgen Christensen suggest looking at Strategic Communications with a dialogical lens, arguing that the field can benefit from englobing multiple points of view and the tensions that may result from this variance (Christensen- Thøger Christensen 2018). Though they focus on organisational Strategic Communications, the argument could be translated for the discipline as a whole.

James Farwell argues that Strategic Communications is an art form and defines it as 'the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives' (Farwell 2012,18). Identifying Strategic Communications as art creates space for multiple perspectives and interpretations.

Lovegrove sheds light on three conceptualisations of Strategic Communications that could arguably be seen as elements – process, multiple tools, and mindset (Lovegrove 2018, 16-18). In the context of Strategic Communications as art, mindset would be at the forefront as it would emphasise understanding the target audience's values and thus identify what opinions to influence, while the tools and process could be subsequent steps in the attempt to create a strategy. Furthermore, today's digital world provides access to imagery from around the world and different epochs, showcasing more narratives and messages disseminated in historical events.

Alexander Khorin and Ekaterina Voronova explain that 'visual culture ... focuses on the transformations taking place in modern culture and society' (Khorin and Voronova 2018, 70). Khorin and Voranova also reaffirm that while people reach their own conclusions when analysing a message or a visual, the message already has an intended effect (Khorin and Voronova 2018, 72). From a Strategic Communications perspective, the message's aim would be tailored toward influencing a certain audience.

Using a Strategic Communications lens, visual rhetoric relates to the message, visual studies to the attitudes and values of the audience, and visual communications to the piece's effectiveness in helping reach the set goals. Goransson and Fagerholm propose a fourth field, Visual Strategy, which would

provide insight into the communications of each actor (Goransson and Fagerholm 2018, 48).

How does meaning come to be? An explanation can be found in symbolic interactionism, which Herbert Blumer explains as meaning being socially constructed, and therefore varies as people place meaning onto things (Blumer 1986, 2). Analysing an image and what it communicates is often based on pictorial text, and Peter Trifonas lists its elements as 'color, line, texture, form, composition, etc' (Trifonas 2020, 697). Each element of pictorial text plays a role in creating meaning (*Idem* 698). Trifonas quotes R. Arnheim's affirmation that all visuals signify and symbolise more than the mere image itself (Arnheim in Trifonas 2020, 697).

Not only does the field of Strategic Communications invite analysis of images and art, but art has become an influence in itself. For instance, Dufour and Steane propose that, just as multiple perspectives characterise Picasso's cubism, pluralism in strategic thinking should be explored and strategic leadership redefined (Dufour and Steane 2014).

James Farwell highlights the communicative importance of art, argues that even in today's internet and technology-driven world, posters are still very relevant to Strategic Communications: 'It is visible and plays a role in shaping emotions as well as attitudes and opinions in most countries' (*Idem,* 91). 'Thinking Inside the Box' showcases posters from Latin America during the decades of 1960-90s, a very turbulent political period in Latin American history with multiple dictatorships, and by analysing these posters one can learn about the messages being shared at the time, allowing for multiple truths.

Brief History of Posters as Political Tools

The history of the poster is long and contested, but generally stretches back to the arrival of the Industrial Revolution in the West, which transformed every aspect of printing, production, consumption, and literacy (Drucker 2018). By the mid-nineteenth century, in Great Britain, continental Europe, and the United States of America, goods that previously had to, and were only able to be, painstakingly made by hand were now mass-produced in unprecedented numbers and speed. Naturally, there was an increase in demand for advertising of these manufactured goods and along with the introduction of printing presses that enabled printing in greater volumes with improved efficiency, the poster was born out of purely commercial demands – to sell products and services.

Credit for producing the first-ever illustrative and colour lithograph poster in 1867 belongs to the French artist Jules Chéret (Iskin 2014). Honouring the poster's original function, throughout Chéret's career, he produced over a

thousand posters that advertised a range of goods and services – from cabarets, municipal festivals, and operas to liquors, perfumes, and pharmaceutical products. Very quickly, the craze for this new form of advertising spread beyond France – from the Beggarstaff brothers in Great Britain to Edward Penfield and William Bradley in North America. Across these capitalist societies, the culture to commodify everything – including public properties (Craven 2006, 95) – had encouraged the culture of posting and consequently turned the poster into a commodity that encouraged consumption while it too was consumed in the process (Sontag 1970).

Curiously, it was not until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 that posters became political. In the United States of America, at least four million copies of James Montgomery Flagg's iconic *'I Want YOU!'* poster were printed between 1917 and 1918 to encourage men to enlist in the military (Noble, Swaney and Weiss 2017, X); in France, where the demands of the war had been extremely detrimental to the economy, war loan posters were mass-produced to call upon the financial support of citizens to fund war efforts; in Germany, propaganda posters were widely circulated to imbue German citizens with a sense of ideological conviction and justify the nation's decision to go to war. In essence, it was at the suggestion of the governments of Europe and America that political posters started to gain momentum in World War I (Goldman 1994, 151). Western governments had begun to realise the effectiveness of posters as a popular form of advertising and made use of them to advertise key messages about the war, to effectively 'sell' the war to its citizens.

After two world wars and by the mid-twentieth century, posters had become a familiar sight and an essential tool for communication. Eventually, its rise culminated in a new golden age of political posters in Latin America. Albeit this time, the poster movement did not materialise out of force. Instead, it had emerged out of necessity (Goldman 1994). During this period, Latin America was undergoing profound social and political transformations; burgeoning understanding in the public consciousness of youth as a subculture, a rise in anti-American sentiments, relentless feminist activism, and an increase in the significance of racial and ethnic identities for indigenous groups. To express their candid understandings and provide a lens on the political and social concerns facing the region at the time, many socio-politically engaged Latin American artists turned to poster art. Capitalising on the built-in visual language of posters that anyone could comprehend and engage with, through posting, these artists were able to intervene in the occupied and repressed public sphere and convey critical political and social commentary, and even revolutionary ideas, to large audiences.

Despite increasing digitalisation, posters continue to dominate today's communication and media space and serve both commercial and political purposes. Today, posters often take on a different form, with many never printed at all but exist as virtual posts on multidirectional social media platforms that anyone from anywhere in the world can react to, comment on, and circulate instantaneously in real-time. Indeed, as artifacts, poster art will continue to evolve.

Posters as Objects

The poster is a physical object[1]. It is not a social media post online that lives in a constructed ecosystem, it is a tangible thing in our world. It cannot exist in the abstract – it must be printed and placed.

Its physicality demands it be hung in a public setting. Its visual or textual message is imposed upon every passer-by without regard for whether the individual wants to 'follow' this content. It is not a step removed in the digital world that lies in the palm of our hands, rather it lives with us and necessitates interaction – be it the act of hanging the poster or even tearing them down.

Most notably though, posters are inserted into our everyday lives. Simply by placing a poster on a neighbourhood lamppost or wall, an individual's daily life is forcibly put in direct conversation with the poster's visual and textual message. By imposing a unique message into a lived reality, the juxtaposition creates a productive discourse.

This discursive property is not the explicit goal of the poster, rather it is a fringe benefit of a utilitarian aesthetic. In the competitive, over stimulating environment of public space, posters must compete for the attention of the passer-by. In creating the poster, the goal is to stand out amongst the clutter, to assert itself in the crowd. This is achieved through aesthetic means geared towards disrupting the visual field (Hutchinson Frederick 1968, 196). To catch one's eye, there may be varying visuals from bright busy patterns to simple high contrast pieces. Whatever the aesthetic manifestation, the purpose is always to contrast with its surroundings, to be as Susan Sontag puts it, 'visually aggressive' (Sontag, 196).

But this visual aggression does more than attract attention. We know there is no harmony between the poster and its surrounding environment – the two are diametrically opposed. By design, the poster is created to stand in stark visual

[1] The 'poster' discussed here is the traditional incarnation. Though the argument can be effectively made that the nature of a poster extends into the digital, the set of circumstances and qualities assigned to the posters of the pre-digital age, and featured in Thinking Inside the Box, are what is dealt with in this section.

opposition with its surroundings. These surroundings are the public places we exist in – our reality. Visually disrupting this environment by extension disrupts reality.

Disrupting reality through aesthetic means is a deeply political act and represents the crux of why posters are so powerful as a tool of political Strategic Communications.

The American Declaration of Independence famously reads 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and *the pursuit of Happiness*.' The inclusion of 'the pursuit of Happiness' in the document represents the enduring and innately human quality we all share, the steadfast notion that a better life is possible. Politics is simply an extension of this.

Politics is about showing and convincing a populace that there is another way, that there is more than their current state represents or suggests. This always capitalises on an individual's pursuit of happiness, be it proposing a new social program to build a better life or blaming an out group for why your life isn't better. However it may manifest, the goal in politics is to upend your reality and replace it.

But the marketplace of political ideas is crowded and leads to a constant battle for hearts and minds. Simply put, 'politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it' (Rancière, Rockhill, and Jacques Rancière 2014, 8). This conception of politics by Jacques Rancière in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics*, bridges the intellectual gap between the political and the visual. Drawing on Kant and Foucault, Jacques Rancière defines aesthetics as 'the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience' (*Ivi*). In other terms, aesthetics deals with the visual and physical material in our environments and how we experience it. Given that politics is about presenting and convincing someone there is a better way, it is necessary to interact with one's experience of reality – the aesthetic of their world.

Posters literally do this by directly inserting a political message into one's everyday life, one that aggressively challenges your surroundings. It creates something new to be seen and fosters a new way to talk about it. This is what makes the poster unique in political Strategic Communications, unlike a speech or social media post, the poster lives in our communities and can physically place itself at odds with the status quo. Simply by placing two visually and conceptually contrasting concepts next to one another, a discourse is fostered, a new conception of reality is born and what is politically possible shifts.

In a less theoretical sense, the ideas discussed here most closely relate to a medium within the fine arts. Collage is defined as 'both the technique and the resulting work of art in which pieces of paper, photographs, fabric and other

ephemera are arranged and stuck down onto a supporting surface'[2]. Collage can be made up of various materials, but the key is that these separate components are all arranged and pasted into a single composition. This is similar to the experience of a poster. The visual and textual message of the poster is arranged next to that of everyday life, creating a new composition of reality.

Collage is very politically powerful because it forces a conversation between separate ideas that may never otherwise intersect, it takes things that are 'seemingly contradictory' and shows they 'belong to the same reality' (Rancière 2009, 28). Taking existing images from magazines, perhaps one on world hunger and another on high fashion, cutting them out and placing them together combines two seemingly distant realities into one narrative. They talk to each other and create a synergistic discourse in which the sum is greater than each of their individual parts. In a two-dimensional realm, this is the exact same result as the poster in public spaces.

Our steadfast pursuit of happiness as human beings is what drives our political nature. We want to believe a better world is possible; the poster physically and aesthetically disrupting our everyday shows nothing is static. The aggressive, seemingly utilitarian juxtaposition of the poster and our lived reality fosters a productive discourse, giving us something new to see and say. The poster stands alone in political Strategic Communications for this reason. There is an acute and specific power in the physical - in the poster as an object.

Production of Posters

Before the physical poster can be placed and produce this discourse in society, it first must be produced. There is a rich history and theoretical underpinnings of this. It begins with the modernisation and standardised education for a wider class of people, which resulted in the development of a new intelligentsia who questioned the daily life – especially in the realm of sociology, politics and civil rights- tirelessly.

Walter Benjamin made epochal contributions to the ideas about modernisation and art in particular. Benjamin 'developed a new aesthetic theory disengaged from the traditional concept of an artwork' (Witte 2003). Within this frameset, the poster as a 'work of art designed for reproducibility' (Benjamin 2002) had a significant role in the propaganda scene during Benjamin's lifetime when he was working on the revolutionary outcomes of mechanical reproduction[3]. For

[2] Tate, 'Collage', Tate <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/collage> [accessed 8 June 2022].

[3] 'A prime example of political art for Benjamin was Heartfield's photomontages which were so 'constructed' that they enabled the viewer to 'deconstruct' the interests underlying Hitler's 'messages' in Nazi propaganda photography (Heartfield using the same medium to critique its

Benjamin, 'new arts' such as photography, film, and sound recording were vital because these new techniques were freeing art from aesthetic isolation. Integrated into everyday life, now art has a political and communicational function.

The 'aura' of a unique piece was replaced by the links of culturally shared communication. Benjamin argued that political posters employed the traditional tools – ink and paper – but as they were democratised forms of art in terms of display and production, they also provided their audience with criticism of politics, war, and revolution (Benjamin 2008). As Alfred Stieglitz famously quoted, 'In poetry, photography or fine arts, the originality of the artwork relies on the originality of what is expressed and the ways of how it is expressed' (Stieglitz 1899, 528-537). Thus, the poster is a simple form of art mainly concerned with the message rather than form. As a result of the industrialised world of the late nineteenth century, with this medium, 'the artist tends to draw what he sees rather than what he imagines' (Baudelaire [1863] 1995), as Baudelaire points out while observing the birth of a new century. Portraying reality, the poster also creates and adds to it via mass production and keeping its content up-to-date: 'The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception' (Benjamin 1973).

Posters described throughout the 'Thinking Inside the Box' exhibition have simple, unsophisticated design and resulted from economical production techniques that enabled the urgent conveying of the message to the streets, their democratic context. As Marshall McLuhan puts succinctly, media are indeed 'the extensions of man' (McLuhan 2003). This also explains the reason behind the chosen medium for conveying these messages; criticising the 'intoxication' of mass media.

Consequently, the area of poster history this research has explored is the ideological poster produced in primitive states under simple technological conditions. Ideas become more attractive due to their authenticity without the technical systems of mass communication usually associated with commercial reasons or persuasion by the state. Also, the making process of such posters resembled their message; employing a cooperative system of design and production, finished posters bearing signs of limited economic conditions and an urgent need for communication. The message does not manifest itself only through design decisions but through every detail of its production and display, which performs the miracle of graphic communication. Years after their production, we are still amazed at their power of moving the masses. The posters

misuse). As such, these photomontages were 'models' empowering viewers to deconstruct other representations where they were expected to be passive consumers of an ideological message.' F. Frascina, J. Harris, *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts* (London : Phaidon Press, in association with the Open University, 1992).

of the 'Thinking inside the box' exhibition, teach that Communicators of today have a lot to learn from the phenomenon of collaborative design and production, printing/ producing on the move, the close link between form and content and pushing the boundaries between different disciplines such as performance, architecture, politics and literature.

As the art critic, Edmundo Desnoes remarks in the catalogue of Cuban posters:

> It [the poster] is geared to the most important fact of our century: the emergence of the masses. In the consumer society, the poster also addresses itself to the masses in the streets and subways, but it is a commercial advertisement; it stimulates individual sensuality and inevitably isolates the individual in the world of objects and pleasure. The revolutionary poster calls for collective participation, cultural growth and international solidarity. It's not the same thing when we read: 'Your skin deserves the best' or see Fidel's image with the caption "We are all one" (Desnoes 1971, 6).

Graphic design, as expressed in the previous section of this article, usually presents itself within the context of the street, closely linked to politics, economics and history. It is impossible to subtract a graphic object from the time and place it was made. Hence, it is not surprising that a community loses a part of its collective memory along with the loss of the graphic language of a certain period; in this case, it is the cultural scene of the mid-century revolutionaries along with the countercultural posters.

The project 'Thinking Inside the Box' thus had a political gesture in unveiling what were printed objects conserved in boxes – sort of time capsules – in the Senate House Library in London. The gesture of opening the boxes, hermeneutically contextualising the counterculture posters, book covers, and radical pamphlets of a specific period of Latin American history, was not only an act of performing the history, but of re-enacting the strategic communication aim of these materials. Some of these materials, already forgotten or destroyed in their countries of origin.

The Cuban art critic Edmundo Desnoes would decipher the Cuban posters as 'a part of our [Cuban] un-systematic research' (*Ibidem*). This is true of any country that experienced forced amnesia of post-destruction; there might be hundreds of ideological fragmentations in the leftist political scene even forty-four years after the events, but not enough documentation about any of these political and artistic experiences.

Political Context of Latin America during the 1960s - 1980s

A very unstable international context marked the 1960s to 1980s in Latin America, where the struggles of the Cold War became evident and impactful for almost all countries in the region.

In February 1945, at the Pan-American Conference in Mexico, the US warned the South America against communism (Abramovici 2001). In 1951, the US committed to providing military aid to South American countries under the Mutual Security Act. The same year, bilateral military assistance agreements were signed, providing military and financial support (*Ibidem*). One year after the Castro revolution in 1959, the Conferences of American Armies were created, bringing together South American countries under the aegis of the US (Willard, and Mark Lavin 2016).

From the 1960' on, Brazil (1964), Chile (1973), Argentina (1976), Bolivia (from 1964 to 1974), just to mention a few, saw a coup d'état led by military, always supported by the USA and under the justification of preventing these countries from becoming new Cubas. Repression, torture and deaths were common during the years of these dictatorships

In November 1975, still engaged in the fight against communism, the authoritarian regimes of Chile, Paraguay, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and Bolivia, created Operation Condor. This operation took the form of a vast plan of repression that organised the elimination of the communist threat. According to the Argentine Human Rights Commission, this plan caused the death of 50,000 people, the disappearance of 35,000 and the imprisonment of 400,000.[4].

After a first unsuccessful coup attempt in 1953, the arrival of Fidel Castro's troops in Havana in 1959 marked the beginning of the revolution against the capitalist ideology of the country. Cuba soon found itself isolated from the international scene, and in 1961, relations with the US broke down when foreign assets were nationalised. After the Bay of Pigs episode in April 1961, the US renounced to another invasion and introduced an economic embargo. Cuba could count on the support of the USSR.

In the late 1960s, the impact of the Cuban revolution and Latin American leftist movements led to large-scale demonstrations in Mexico, that were harshly repressed. In 1968, the intervention of the Military resulted in hundreds of deaths (Reding 1989).

Contrary to its neighbours, Colombia enjoyed certain political stability and experienced a short period of dictatorship from 1953 to 1957. Revolts began in 1960 with the creation of the FARC, self-defence group controlled by the Communist Party. The National Liberation Army was then created, and later the M-19, an

[4] Ministerio Público Fiscal de Argentina, *La Operación Cóndor – Proceso | Plan Condor*.

urban guerrilla group that became known for its hostage-taking. Colombia then entered a period of great violence and corruption. The FARC and the M-19 took advantage of their power and heavily relied upon kidnapping to get what they wanted from the local authorities. In the early 1980s, paramilitary groups supported by the army were formed, committing massacres and kidnappings. Several government operations led to the elimination of the guerrilla. However, the violence continued until the peace agreement signed in 2016 with the FARC.

This overview set the scene and the context for the political posters and pamphlets produced during the period and object of the project 'Thinking Inside the Box'. Based on what has been discussed above about the role of posters as a Strategic Communication tool, the next part will explore their role in the Latin America context.

Recruitment Tool and Manifestation of Power: The Significance of Posters for Social Movements

This section argues that posters were crucial to the social movements in South America in the 1970s and 1980s because they served as an effective educational and recruitment tool, but especially because they constituted a manifestation of power in the face of instances of state terrorism mentioned above.

Many of the posters and pamphlets which the exhibition 'Thinking Inside the Box' highlights were produced in the 1970s and 1980s by student-led protest movements or labour unions challenging the actions of the newly installed military dictatorships in several South American countries, as the previous section summarised. The exhibition shows, for instance, the black and white cover of a pamphlet produced by the dockworkers of Porto dos Santos in Brazil in the 1980s showing the image of an impressive crowd of people with their fists raised taking up most of the cover and the words 'Collective wage agreements are our strength' written below (Figure 1). In contrast, various posters by the OCLAE (the Continental Latin American and Caribbean Student Organisation) resort to a strong use of colour when they call for solidarity with the Chilean students targeted by the military junta in the 1970s (Figure 2) or when they advocate for Latin American unity against imperialism (Figure 3). Another poster displays a red bloodstain on a simple white background with the words 'The CRIC denounces' written below the stain (Figure 4). The CRIC is a regional Colombian indigenous council who at the time condemned government terror and violence against their people. Here, the single bloodstain symbolises the systemic violence against indigenous people in Colombia.

Thus, we can see that the posters produced by these South American civil society groups and organisations often use eye-catching colours, powerful images,

easily recognisable symbols as well as very few words. In the first part of this section, it will be investigated how it is specifically these idiosyncrasies of posters which render them so important for social movements challenging the status quo.

Posters have gained an extraordinary importance for protest movements since the beginning of the twentieth century, as explained before in this article, when mass production became inexpensive and thus enabled the extensive dissemination of posters (Deželan and Maksuti 2016, 56-86). However, they remain relevant to social movements to this day mainly for recruitment and educational purposes. To make their narrative intelligible to the passer-by in a short period of time and to catch their attention, posters 'aim to tell a story quickly, dramatically, and primarily visually' (Fahlenbach, Klimke, and Scharloth 2016, 77-93, 83).

Keeping this in mind, it can be observed that the posters described above employ only very few words, use symbols like a bloodstain to make the poster look more dramatic, and resort to the use of images and bold colours. Emotionalisation – the arousal of emotions in the recipients, such as shock, anger, or hope – is often used to emphasise the poster's message and to make it more memorable (Demarmels 2016, 233-242). Similarly, sociologists James Jasper and Jane Poulsen speak of a 'moral shock' which drastic poster imagery may induce in the viewer (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995, 493-512). The desired consequence is recruiting formerly uninvolved citizens to the social movement's cause (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2015, 557-566). What is more, posters have the advantage that the narrative they display is under the direct control of the transmitter and not reshaped by a mediator. This allows a social movement which criticises the current political context to get their message directly to the viewer without being censored or their message otherwise distorted.

However, it can be argued that the visual communication of protest movements exceeds seeking attention purely for recruitment and educational purposes. Rather, social movements 'seek to disrupt the existing political order, transcend, or abandon its ideological trappings, and create new possibilities' (McGarry, Erhart, Eslen-Ziya, Jenzen, and Korkut 2020, 16.), which will be explored further in this second section. Visual materials like posters can be very impactful for that end because they publicly display the activists' narrative and thus openly counterbalance or challenge mainstream dominant discourses on contentious issues (Doerr, Mattoni, and Teune 2015). Visual codes such as symbols or the use of certain colours which can be quickly processed by the passer-by play a crucial role in simplifying complex messages to envision an alternative way of thinking and acting in the public sphere. In this sense, posters disseminated by left-wing social movements in various South American countries during the 1970s and 1980s can be considered a manifestation of power in the face of state violence.

Hence, in the context of the South American societies at that time, genuine power resided in the citizens who acted in concert to form social movements. Arendt places great importance on the physical citizens publicly acting together as a group. But in the context of state terrorism, it seems reasonable to argue that posters may have constituted an alternative for the gathering of members who would have endangered their lives had they openly appeared in a public space. Instead, posters and pamphlets could be placed in any public space for everyone to see. This indicated to all citizens that it may not be impossible to disrupt and transcend the existing political order and that those who may wish for it are not alone.

From this we can conclude that, apart from a being a useful recruitment and educational tool, the posters shown in the exhibition 'Thinking Inside the Box' functioned as a manifestation of power in the face of state terrorism. Now, however, the use of these visuals has shifted, as is discussed in the following section.

Commercialisation and Mass Reproduction

When questioning the long-lasting impact of political posters and imagery from Latin America throughout the mid-20th century, one notable figure repeatedly resurfaces, Argentine revolutionary, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. The image in question, 'Guerrillero Heroico' (Figure 5), taken by former fashion photographer, Alberto Korda, in 1960 at a rally and memorial service for the victims of the French freighter Le Coubre (McCormick, and Mark T. Berger 2019) catapulted Guevara's face into an iconic symbol used for differing political, social and cultural purposes. Following Guevara's execution in 1967, the image institutionalised itself as symbol amongst growing global youth movements that rebelled against the sedate nature of the 1950s that accelerated in the 1960s with growing unpopularity of the Vietnam war and the subsequent popular resistance that this created (*Idem*). 'Jornada Del Guerrillero Heroico' (Day of the Heroic Guerrillero) (Figure 6) was published by the Continental Latin American and Caribbean student organisation, a leftist youth organisation set up to advance the interests of students in the Latin American region, following Guevara's death, whilst Figure 7 shows a simplistic version of 'Guerillero Heroico' being used on a poster plaque at a demonstration against the Vietnam war in Kiel, Germany, in 1968.

However, after the end of the Cold war, Vietnam war and the end of Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba, how has the image been used in a 21st century context? It has become one of the most globally reproduced photographic images and has been reproduced onto fashion garments, graffiti and banners to name a few. Does

the mass commercialisation and reproduction of the image unintentionally strip it of these political, social and cultural features or does it expand it further through the more audiences it reaches? A question that is entirely dependent on the geographical context.

Following his death, 'Guerrillero Heroico' spread widely around European radical networks eventually leading to the transformation of the image by Irish artist, Jim Fitzpatrick to a one-dimensional black stencil image with a prominent red background (Figure 8) making it an easily reproducible piece of art (Prestholdt 2012, 513).

The image of Guevara with long hair, a beard, wearing a starred beret and looking onwards into the distance resonated with Western youth as an alternative to clean-cut government officials, with his look becoming a revolutionary fashion statement (McCormick et al. 2012). It is perhaps this association of Guevara's imagery via Guerrillero Heroico as something 'exotic' and 'different' that has fostered meaning in the West as a communist symbol representing the alternative to a typical liberal democracy. In 2012, the U.S. lifestyle retailer, Urban Outfitters, known for its apparel aimed at young adults with an interest in alternative subcultures released a Che Guevara Flag Poster (Figure 9) on its website under the description 'Let out a rebel yell-without saying a word'[5]. The poster was met with backlash from Guevara adversaries, with an open letter penned from the Human Rights Foundation asking for its removal due to the controversial nature of Guevara's record of actions within Cuba (Thor 2012).

Although it was eventually removed from sale, the poster and its Guevara imagery are an illustrative piece of how a romanticised revolutionary version of Guevara lives on in the commercialisation of Guerrillero Heroico that has only been possible because of the reproduction creating a continuous rebirthing effect of the communism imagery. Fitzpatrick's artistry in itself reconstructed the meaning behind what the original image, a piece of photojournalism, and the specific time and space of the rebellious nature of Western youth created the environment for commercialisation to be the constant reproduction of leftist rebellion for the West. In comparison, Guerrillero Heroico in Bolivia was used politically by Evo Morales's government to explore ideas of Cuban independence but also to remind the Bolivian population of Guevara's death in Bolivia and its subsequent history (Cambre 2014). As reproduction lives on so do the historical connotations that it brings with it.

The commercialisation of Che Guevara's imagery through Guerrillero Heroico and Fitzpatrick's artistic interpretation of the image has not led it to lose its political importance or hinder the impact of political imagery within Latin

[5] Urban Outfitters, *Che Guevara Flag Poster*, (2012).

America. It exists as a vessel continuing to shape different regions history and cultural identity with Cuba and the rise of communism in the mid- 20th century.

Western-based for-profit companies, such as Urban Outfitters, are involved in the process of commercialisation for their own financial benefit in addition to continuing on the image of Guevara as a product of Western cultural identity in the 1960s with a narrative of liberal democracy vs communism. Whereas in the Miami Cuban diaspora the hardships of the Castro regime make the Guerrillero Herroico viewed with distaste and in Bolivia the imagery is used as a means of teaching a country's history. Latin American political imagery will continue to live on and serve the purpose of the narrative that it is sustaining with mass-production amplifying this factor in the case of Che Guevara.

Conclusion

Strategic Communication does not have to be an impassioned speech given by a revolutionary leader, or a radio address delivered by an authority figure, or even what is printed on the front pages of newspapers in order for it to be effective and influential. In fact, Strategic Communication can be delivered to the masses through something as modest as a poster on the side of a building, which can deliver the same if not more value. The exhibition 'Thinking Inside the Box' at King's College London demonstrates the power that political posters had in Latin America throughout the revolutionary period of 1960-1990s. It also acknowledges the power and influence political posters have as a mechanism of strategic communication. From the early political posters in WWI to the now commercialised face of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara that can be seen printed on t-shirts, the visual impact that political posters have on their target audience and general public cannot be understated. This paper explains the origin and continuing influence political posters have on various target audiences across the globe as well as works to understand the influence of the medium.

The poster is a powerful tool of Strategic Communication because it is both a political tactic and a form of art. A political poster lives in a community, with its members passing it potentially daily and therefore forced to interact with it. It can also be a stand in for a revolutionary in authoritarian regimes where physical presence poses too great a risk. A poster can represent not just the idea but the person behind the cause. Posters not only allow its creators to visually communicate with their audience in a static format, but mass-producing the communication product allows further reach, especially in a time before the internet.

The history of postersrepresents an ever evolving medium of Strategic Communication. As posters once were merely leveraged for selling perfume, we

now see the digital poster living on social media promoting numerous products, causes, candidates, and more. A format of revolution, posters can be read by a variety of audiences, literate and illiterate, and produced to control a message to the public, surpassing usual information gatekeepers. The journey of political posters throughout history reflect this critical communication format, especially for revolutionaries.

Perhaps the perfect medium in a time of revolution, the posters speak to a turbulent time across Latin America. Briefly described in this article, from counter-revolutions in Brazil to socialist revolutions in Ecuador, the political posters displayed in this exhibition served as recruiting tools, educational explainers, awareness campaigns, and more to promote various causes of revolution. Many of the posters were created by student groups, demonstrating how innovative this medium can be as younger audiences continue to adapt it for their causes. While this article as a whole works to both explain and convince readers of both the power and importance of political posters, perhaps the best way to truly convince an audience is to view them oneself. As all great art should, these political posters leave viewers with more than just a message, but with an emotional response. While one may not feel called to take up arms at first glance, these posters demonstrate a power on their own that cannot be denied.

Appendix

Figure 1: Cover of a pamphlet produced by the dockworkers of Porto dos Santos in Brazil in the 1980s. The words below read 'Collective wage agreements are our strength'. Senate House Library: S 320 PAM/2/18

Figure 2: This poster, designed by Manuel Bu, was produced to advertise the Day of Solidarity with the people and students of Chile, organised by OCLAE, the Continental Latin American and Caribbean Student Organisation. The publishing date is unknown. Senate House Library: B 320 PAM/Posters

Figure 3: This poster, published in 1973 by the OCLAE just before the Chilean military coup of the same year, calls for Latin American unity against imperialism. Senate House Library: B 320 PAM/Posters

Figure 4: The Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (Cauca Regional Indigenous Council), abbreviated as CRIC, is a regional Colombian indigenous council who condemned government terror and violence against their people with the publishing of this poster in 1979.

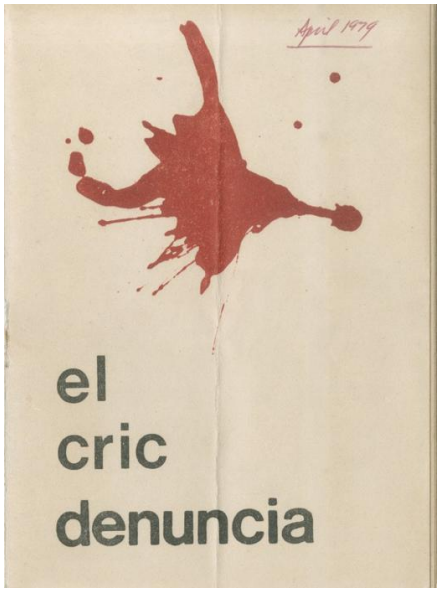

Figure 5
Source: Alberto Korda, Guerrillero Heroico (1960)

Figure 6: 'Jornada Del Guerrillero Heroico'. Continental Latin American and Caribbean Student Organisation. u.d.

Figure 7:
About 500 people demonstrate against Vietnam War in Kiel on 29 March 1968
Source: dpa picture alliance

Figure 8
Source: Jim Fitzpatrick, Che Guevara VIVA CHE 1968!

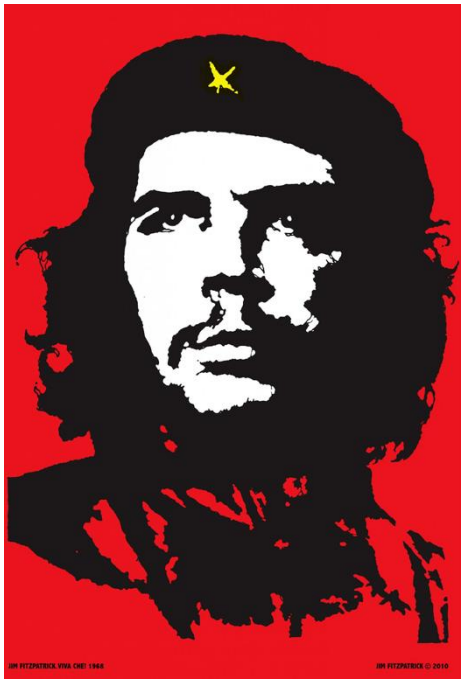

Figure 9
Source: Urban Outfitters, Che Guevara Flag Poster (2012)

References

Abramovici, Pierre. August 2001. Dirty War', Le Monde Diplomatique <https://mondediplo.com/2001/08/12condor>

Oxford Reference.' 4 May 2022. Aestheticism' <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198604761.001.0001/acref-9780198604761-e-42#.>

Alexander, Robert J. 1985. 'Bolivia's Democratic Experiment', *Current History*, 84.499 (1985). https://www.jstor.org/stable/45315459?seq=1

Anderson, Jon Lee. 2010. *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*, Rev. ed. New York : Grove Press .

Arnheim, Rudolf. 1974 *Art And Visual Perception: A psychology of the creative eye*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

'Bal Du Moulin De La Galette - Auguste Renoir | Musée D'orsay'. 2022. *Musee-Orsay.Fr*. <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/bal-du-moulin-de-la-galette-497>

Baudelaire, Charles. 1995. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. ed. by Thom Mayne . London: Phaidon.

BCN Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile. 2020. 'Historia Política - Periodo 1990- Reconstrucción Democrática'. https://www.bcn.cl/historiapolitica.

Benjamin, Walter. 2002. *The Arcades Project.* London : Harvard University Press.

– – –. 1997. *Illuminations.* translated by Zohn, H. London : Fontana.

– – –. 2008. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin.

Blumer, Herbert. 1986. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective And Method.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cambre, Maria-Carolina. 2014. *The Semiotics of Che Guevara: Affective Gateways*. Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics. London: Bloomsbury.

Christensen, Emma, and Lars Thøger Christensen. 2018. 'Dialogics Of Strategic Communication', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 23, 438-455 <https://doi.org/10.1108/ccij-08-2017-0073>

Corkill, David. 1985. 'Democratic Politics in Ecuador, 1979-1984', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 4.2 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3338316>.

Council on Foreign Relations. 2019. 'U.S.-Cuba Relations' <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-cuba-relations>

Craven, David. 2006. *Art and revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990*, 2nd edn .New Haven: Yale University Press.

Demarmels, Sascha. 2016. 'Posters and Placards' in *Protest Cultures: A Companion*, Kathrin Fahlenbach, Martin Klimke, and Joachim Scharloth (eds.), London: Berghahn Books, pp. 233-242.

Desnoes, Edmundo. 1971. 'From Consumerism to Social Conscience: The Poster in Cuban Revolution 1959-1970': *Cubaance Affiches.* Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum.

Deželan, Tomaž, and Maksuti, Alem. 2016. 'Humanist propaganda: The poster as a visual medium of communication used by "new" social movements', *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, 16, No 2: 56-86.

'Diego M. Rivera. 2022. Detroit Industry Murals, 1932-1933', *Detroit Institute Of Arts* <https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/detroit-industry-murals-58537>

Doerr, Nicole; Mattoni, Alice; and Teune, Simon. 2015. 'Visuals in Social Movements' in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements,* Della Porta, Donatella and Diani, Mario (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 557-566.

dpa picture alliance. 1968. *About 500 People Demonstrate against Vietnam War in Kiel on 29 March 1968*, <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-about-500-people-demonstrate-against-vietnam-war-in-kiel-on-29-march-102973462.html>

Drucker, Johanna. 2018 *History of the Book.* Los Angeles: UCLA, 2018). <https://hob.gseis.ucla.edu/pdf/HoBCoursebook_Ch_9.pdf>

Dufour, Yvon, and Peter Steane. 2014. 'Creative Strategic Thinking And Sustainable Leadership: Lessons From Picasso', *Journal Of Global Responsibility*, 5, 219-225 <https://doi.org/10.1108/jgr-05-2014-0018>

Farwell, James P. 2012. *Persuasion And Power.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Fitzpatrick, Jim. 1968. *Viva Che!* <https://jimfitzpatrick.com/product/viva-che/>

Frascina, F. Harris, J. 1992. *Art in Modern Culture: an Anthology of Critical Texts*, London : Phaidon Press.

Goldman, Shifra. 1994. *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and social change in Latin America and the United States.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Goransson, Karina, and Anna-Sara Fagerholm. 2018. 'Towards Visual Strategic Communications: An Innovative Interdisciplinary Perspective On Visual Dimensions Within The Strategic Communications Field', *Journal Of Communication Management*, 22, 46-66 <https://doi.org/10.1108/jcom-12-2016-0098>

Halvorseen, Thor. 2012. 'An Open Letter to Urban Outfitters Regarding Their Che Guevara Merchandise', *Huffington Post*. <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/an-open-letter-to-urban-o_b_1895353>

Hutchinson, Harold Frederick. 1968. *The Poster; An Illustrated History from 1860*. New York: Viking Press, <https://archive.org/details/posterillustrate0000unse/page/n7/mode/2up>

Iskin, Ruth. 2014 *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s-1900s* Hanover: Dartmouth College Press.

Jasper, James M., and Poulsen, Jane D. 1995. 'Recruiting strangers and friends. Moral shocks and social networks in animal rights and anti-nuclear protests', *Social Problems* 42, 493-512.

Khorin, Alexander, and Ekaterina Voronova. 2021 'The Role of Visuals In The Communication Process', *Filosofija. Sociologija*, 32, 69-75 <https://doi.org/10.6001/fil-soc.v32i1.4381>

Korda, Alberto. 1960 *Guerrillero Heroico*, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Heroico1.jpg>

Lovegrove, Kitty. 2018. 'The Acoustic World of Influence: How Musicology Illuminates Strategic Communications.', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 5, 13-49 <https://doi.org/10.30966/2018.riga.5.1.>

Mainwaring, Scott. 1988. 'Political Parties and Democratization in Brazil and the Southern Cone', *Comparative Politics*, 21.1, 91 <https://doi.org/10.2307/422073>.

McCormick, Gordon H., and Mark T. Berger. 2019. 'Ernesto (Che) Guevara: The Last "Heroic" Guerrilla', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42.4, 336–62 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1398319>

McGarry, Aidan; Erhart, Itir; Eslen-Ziya, Hande; Jenzen, Olu; and Korkut, Umut (eds.). 2020. *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

McLuhan, Marshall. 2003. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, California: Gingko Press.

Ministerio Público Fiscal de Argentina, *La Operación Cóndor – Proceso | Plan Condor*. https://www.mpf.gob.ar/plan-condor/la-operacion-condor-proceso/.

Mulvaney, Kieran. 2022. 'The Improbable Falklands War Still Resonates Decades Later', *National Geographic.* <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/falklands-war-history-and-legacy>.

Noble, Aaron, Keith Swaney, and Vicki Weiss. 2017. *A Spirit of Sacrifice: New York State in the First World War*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Organizacion Continental Latinoamericana de Estudiantes. n.d. *Jornada Del Guerrillero Heroico, Octubre 8 al 15* . <https://calisphere.org/item/5f27a0b84ce2beade0564c68a27ddbe9/>

Paul, Christopher. 2011. *Strategic Communication*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.

Prestholdt, Jeremy. 2012. 'Resurrecting Che: Radicalism, the Transnational Imagination, and the Politics of Heroes', *Journal of Global History*, 7.3, 506–26 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022812000307>

Rancière, Jacques. 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso

Rancière, Jacques and Gabriel Rockhill. 2014. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Bloomsbury Revelations. London: Bloomsbury.

Reding, Andrew. 1989. 'Mexico under Salinas: A Facade of Reform.' *World Policy Journal*, 6.4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40209130>

Reed T. V. 2016 'Protest as Artistic Expression' in *Protest Cultures: A Companion*, Kathrin Fahlenbach, Martin Klimke, and Joachim Scharloth (eds.). Berghahn Books, pp. 77-93.

Sontag, Susan. 1970. 'Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity', in Dugald Stermer (ed.), *The Art of Revolution*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Stieglitz, Alfred. 1989. 'On Pictoral Photography', *Scribner's Magazine,* Vol 6. Nov.

Tate, 'Collage'. 2022. *Tate* <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/collage>

Trifonas, Peter Pericles. 2020. 'The Semiotics of Visual Perception and the Autonomy of Pictorial Text: Toward a Semiotic Pedagogy of the Image', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53, 696-705 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1761329>

Willard, Alex and Mark Lavin. 2016. 'The Conference of American Armies: Interoperability through Shared Visions and Partnership', *Regional Insights*, No 1. <https://www.williamjperrycenter.org/sites/default/files/publication_associated_files/The%20Conference%20of%20American%20Armies.pdf>

Witte, Bernd. 2003. *Walter Benjamin*. Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Publications.

Acknowledgment: This article is a result of a collaborative work that was part of the Project "Thinking Inside the Box" (https://www.thinkinginsidethebox.co.uk), conducted at King's College London in 2022. The following students of the MA Strategic Communications collaborated to the production of the article and should be acknowledged as fundamental for the final work: Stella Goodwin, Nour Mahdjoub, Kelly Mahoney, Lula Frances Rappoport, Marie Charlotte Gerda Söding, Fabiola Adysandra Susilo, Can Beyza Uçak, Alma Sophie Charlotte Uhlmann and Isis Athina Ribeiro de Vasconcellos.

Dr. Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho
Is Reader in Brazilian and Latin American Studies at the Department of War Studies at King's College London. He holds a PhD from the University of Passau, Germany.
Contact: vinicius.carvalho@kcl.ac.uk

Received: 10/11/2024
Accepted: 8/11/2025