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## Critical Media Literacy: A Social Semiotic Analysis and Multimodal Discourse of Corpocracy

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### Abstract

Facing a wide range of mass culture as part of everyday life, art teachers have a responsibility to foster students' critical media literacy to analyze the meanings conveyed in visual images. I use activist artist Ron English's art as an example to assist students in deconstructing meanings presented in product packaging. Social semiotics and multimodal discourse are suggested in facilitating these processes of deconstruction to address several controversial issues presented in the packaging. The ultimate goal of analyzing/deconstructing different visual culture can foster students' critical media literacy and facilitate their active participation in a democratic society.

## **Introduction**

Fostering students' critical media literacy is an essential component in the visual art curriculum in the United States. Recent changes in technology, media, and society require the development of critical media literacy to empower students to accurately read media messages and produce media products in order to be active participants in a democratic society. To further this effort, critical media literacy employs theoretical frameworks and concepts such as, feminism, multiculturalism, and radical democracy, as vehicles to teach core concepts. Such an approach draws upon students' own skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, helping to develop their abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and enhancing their capacities to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts (Kellner & Share, 2007).

This article focuses particularly on the artwork of activist artist Ron English. English uses irony to reveal the true purpose of popular-advertisements in many public places. I use social semiotics and multimodal discourse that emphasize making sense of signs in a social context to analyze English's artworks. This suggestion can serve as a guideline for art teachers to discuss corpocracy with students in order to cultivate their critical media literacy. The purpose of this article is to assist art teachers to guide their students to understand that artwork has other functions besides decoration and commercial purposes; the artist plays an important role in promoting the development of democracy in society. Art can cultivate students' critical thinking ability by equipping them with the necessary art vocabulary in analyzing media culture in society.

Corpocracy is an absurd reality of our society in which corporations and their interests gain control of the economic and political systems according to their own business interests. Recently, a group of artists has explored the concept of corpocracy in an exhibition featured at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston. In this article, I use Ron English's artworks as examples to penetrate the issue of corpocracy. Ron English is an activist artist who explores the world of propaganda, brand imagery and advertising through the subversion of commercial icons, liberation of public billboards, public murals, surrealist paintings, and culture jamming on a commercial scale (Sarkar, 2015). To understand how English's artworks tackle the facets of corpocracy through text, signs, and multimodal methods of communication in a social context to construct meaning, I employ social semiotics and multimodal discourse as an analytical framework. In conclusion, I then discuss several implications of corpocracy for arts education, including cultural jamming and subvertising as a means to foster critical visual literacy.

### **Fostering Students' Critical Media Literacy**

Critical media literacy education refers to a pedagogy that allows students to analyze the relations between media, audiences, information, and power, and to produce alternative media texts that challenge the messages in dominant discourse. Critical media literacy among young people is particularly important given the near constant presence of media in everyday life through television, movies, popular music, video games, wikis, blogs, and social networking websites. Thus, teachers play an essential role in helping students navigate new literacy practices (Gainer, 2010). The problem, as Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) mention, is that traditionally, media education has focused on the analysis of media texts, namely, introducing students to issues of representation, authorial intent, and aesthetic presentation. However, the interpenetration of media consumption and democratic participation has become increasingly apparent over the past decade. Educators have admitted that media literacy is not just used to teach students to read and understand texts, but also to situate them in broader social, cultural, and political contexts. Therefore, I aim to guide art teachers to foster students' critical media literacy using the framework of social semiotic and multimodal discourse analysis to deconstruct the phenomena of corpocracy through Ron English's activist advertisements and figure sculptures.

### **Corpocracy**

It could be said that the world is not run by governments, but by corporations. These global titans have more control over aspects of an individual's life than most people ever realize, and the phenomena of corpocracy affects several aspects of our lives. Large corporations manage the brands of goods that we purchase, for example, in the form of selling their house-brand goods at a lower price compared to the other brands. Large corporations manage their own manufacturing companies and physical – or online – stores which allow them to minimize prices with minimal negotiation or accountability to producers themselves. This positions small corporations at a disadvantage, as they cannot control the prices of goods to such an extent. Firstly, small corporations may not own their manufactures so that they need to purchase raw materials from large corporations, limiting small corporations' ability to control import prices. Secondly, large corporations may charge a display fee if these goods are to be sold in large corporation physical stores. Both of these factors impact the ability of small brands to offer competitive pricing. This gives large corporations an advantage over total cost, influencing which products buyers ultimately purchase.

Corpocracy is a word that combines 'corporate' and '-cracy'. Corporate refers to the body in the Latin corpus, and -cracy in today's understanding refers to a form of government. However, when applied to critical media literacy, this portmanteau takes on a slightly different meaning. Brumback (2011) explains that -cracy is derived from the Greek, *kartia*,

the term for power. Corpocracy thus exemplifies regime power, meaning the acquisition of more and more regime power and the continuous abuse of such power in serving its own interests at a terrible cost to public interests. Sharing this perspective, Henderson and Ronald define corpocracy as:

a democratic form of government in which the financial markets and corporate business interests determine and regulate public policy with the incorporation, maintenance and strict adherence to neoliberal ideology, privatizes and outsources government functions to the private sector, and has no civil service structure. (2013, p.3)

For the purposes of this paper, I define corpocracy is a form of control exerted by large privatized corporations over customers' purchases or market choices. These large privatized corporations employ visual effects to beautify their products through packings or advertisements in order to obtain the maximum consumption quota. Specifically, they may highlight the beneficial parts of products, and minimize visibility of the harmful aspects of the products through various advertisement strategies.

### **Social Semiotics Analysis of Corpocracy**

To examine the effects of corpocracy on media discourses, we need to learn about the differences between formal semiotics and social semiotics, and what social semiotics emphasize. "Formal semiotics mainly [is] interested in the systematic study of the system of signs themselves. Yet, social semiotics explores how people use signs to construct the life of a community" (Lemke, 1990, p. 183), and is concerned with making meaning through language, gestures, action, clothing, social context, and symbols. Social semiotics further articulates that making meaning does not occur in isolation but rather is situated in a social context or activities within a shared community (Jaipal, 2010). Harrison (2003) has three ideas about how the social semiotics helps viewers to make sense of visual images. Firstly, social semioticians believe that people see the world through signs. Secondly, the meaning of signs is created by people, and situated in their lives as experienced within social/cultural communities. Thirdly, social semiotic systems provide people with a variety of resources for making meaning. Similarly, Kress (2010) argues that social semiotics is about the meaning potentials of cultural forms.

Scholars who favor the approach of social semiotics emphasize that understanding issues should be based on social context. In order to comprehensively understand the phenomenon of corpocracy, it is necessary to go over background information of corpocracy. Globalization is creating a new corpocracy, in which a network of financial markets and corporations now dominates the world. There are over 45,000 corporations worldwide today, but the 200 largest

companies make up 25% of the total GDP of the world. The best historical model of corpocracy is the United States Gilded Age, from 1870s to about 1900, when individuals established individual corporations, such as John D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan, and created a ruthless, financially-driven corporate economy in the United States of America. Consequently, government and unions were weakened and ultimately taken over by the corpocracy. This has given corporacy an enormous degree of social control, and places the organization and sustenance of a global social justice movement as a current challenge for contemporary consumer life (Derber, n.d.). For example, Wal-Mart is an emblematic retailer in the United States, controlling the flow of personal products that many buy for their homes and bodies. Customers purchase items that are displayed on the shelves, by which we may understand Wal-Mart as controlling which brands customers can choose from. This has resulted in earnings that are comparable with those of global companies such as Microsoft, and can be interpreted as a strivance for market domination on a global scale. Wal-Mart has thus become a role model for chain discount stores sprouting everywhere, from Home Depot and Kmart to McDonald's. But beyond retail, Wal-Mart's contribution has been in demonstrating how the control of distribution is the key to accumulating power in today's economy (Derber, 1998).

Corpocracy is also connected with corporate media. The corporate media largely shapes what the public learns about different social issues, thereby distorting the democratic process. The U.S media system is dominated by about 25 corporations, which range across TV networks, cable TV channels, radio stations, newspapers, book publishing and more. These media corporations include Time Warner, Viacom, News Corporation, General Electric and Disney, Gannett, Clear Channel and the New York Times. These media corporations favor their own interests and work against objective analysis of events and issues. Consequently, the under-informed public receives their self-serving information in a relatively passive way (Geyman, 2011).

Many efforts have been made to try to stop corpocracy in the United States. For example, environmental and economic justice movements are working to stop numerous oil and gas pipelines, and to shut down the pipelines of corporate money into politics. These environmental and economic justice movements make their efforts to renewing democracy and undermine corpocracy. Also, corpocracy endangers not only the fate of our democracy but the fate of the planet, since the corpocracy prioritizes short-term profit over the health of humans and all living species (Truthout, 2015).

### ***The Significance of Using Social Semiotics to Analyze Visual Images***

Visual imagery is a powerful form of communication delivering messages or information through different modes such as pictorials, symbols, graphics, color, and tables of non-lexical

items (John & Akinkulore, 2013). One means of deconstructing and understanding the visual images produced by corporations is through the application of social semiotic theory, which has been widely applied to analyze visual imagery. Social semiotics entail analyzing signs and their interrelation as well as multimodal modes of communication. Social semioticians also pay attention to a wide range of modes in which meaning is made, these include: imagery, written text, layout, gesture, motion pictures, and three-dimensional objects. Although social semiotics shares many similarities with the mainstream semiology, it is unique because it emphasizes that image is not the result of singular, isolated, creative activity, but it is itself a social process (e.g. Rose, 2012). Thus, its meaning is constructed between the producer and the viewer, reflecting their negotiated social, cultural, political beliefs, values, and attitudes (Harrison, 2003). Social semiotics focuses on social interaction in relation to signs. In other words, social semiotics emphasizes more on semiotic resources, signifiers, beyond the literal meaning of a sign.

Social semiotics emphasizes discussing signs and making sense of them in social contexts. It is very suitable to use social semiotics to discuss the phenomena of corpocracy, because corporations use various mass media channels to promote their brand identities and products, and to control public consumption. Also, large corporations monopolize different aspects of life including media, supermarkets, banks and health insurance using media strategies such as television advertisements, supermarket posters, newspapers, and more. All of them coerce people to receive, and believe, a particular message that the corporation wants to convey. In order to develop more critical and aware customers and citizens, art teachers may introduce the phenomena of corpocracy in class and use social semiotic to deconstruct the intent of such media materials advertisements and strategies. Overall, social semiotics emphasizes the social context of the sign. In advertisements, social semioticians are interested in examining the meaning of an advertisement shaped not only by how the viewer interprets the advertisement but also by the context in which the viewer looks the advertisement.

### ***Social Semiotics in Analyzing Visual Images***

In applying a social semiotic approach to analyze images, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) advocate for analyzing the representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning of visual images. This method specifies the process of analyzing corporations' visual images. Feng and O'Halloran (2013) further clarify these three aspects. Representational meaning is identified with the configuration of processes (e.g. action), participants (e.g. actors), and circumstances (e.g. locations). Interactive meaning includes the four parameters of symbolic contact, social distance, power relations, and involvement between viewers and participants. Contact, in television advertisements for example, is constructed by camera shot (e.g. close or long shot); power relation is related to camera angle (e.g. high or low angles); involvement is linked with horizontal camera angle (e.g. frontal or oblique angles). Royce

(2002) explains that vectors refer to the graphic arrows which give direction, as well as the sense that one participant is interacting with another participant or object. Moreover, the following questions are helpful for analysis of representational meaning. What objects are in the image? Are there any vectors in the action? If yes, what kind of story does this action tell? If there are no vectors, what is the image trying to tell me in terms of social/ cultural concepts? (Harrison, 2003). With regards to the interpersonal metafunction, Harrison (2003) discusses three angles: the frontal angle, the oblique angle, and high angle. The frontal angle means that the represented participants (RPs, refers to both human and non-human objects in the image), people, places, and objects within the image, are presented frontally to the viewer. This angle has been found to generate stronger viewer involvement. High angles are mostly used to indicate to the audience that the RP has less power. While, low angles mean that the RP has more power. To better understand the relationship between camera angle and power, the concepts of “demand” and “offer” need to be introduced, Vorvilas, Karalis, and Ravanis (2010) point out that “contact with the viewer is accomplished through the function of images as ‘image acts’ which request her attention (demand-images) or offer to her visual information (offer-images)” (p. 260). While the visual elements in the images can indicate whether they are effectively “demand” or “offer” images, text can also reinforce this information, such as giving information through statements, or demanding information through asking questions (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Compositional meaning connects representational and interactive meanings into an image through three interrelated systems; information values, salience, and framing. Information value refers to the placement of visual elements (e.g. top or bottom, left or right); salience deals with the prominence of visual elements, through size, the sharpness of focus, color contrast, and so on; and framing describes the connection between visual elements. Drawing upon the work of Harrison (2003), the following questions are helpful for discussing the composition meaning:

1. How have the RPs [the represented participants] been placed to provide information, and why did the producer of the image chosen this placement?
2. Which RPs are more salient than others, and how does this salience affect the impact and meaning of the image?
3. How are the RPs held together or separated within an image, and why?
4. How does the use of color or lack of it affect the rhetorical message of the image?
5. How real does the image appear to the viewer and does this sense of reality affect the validity of its message and that of the accompanying text? (p. 56-58).

### **Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Corporacy**

Using social semiotics as a way to analyze multimodal discourses provides one way to examine the multiple layers of meaning in a work. For example, we disclose the meaning not

only through language, but also through gestures, posture, facial expression, and the other embodied resources such as physical distance, stance, and movement. By combining these aspects of making meaning, multimodality aims to offer a way of talking about how gesture and talk co-occur, how language and image work together, or how images, language, and sound are coordinated (Iedema, 2003). Multimodal discourse analysis has long been recognized and employed by different academic fields in the arts, such as dance, theater, literary, and visual arts, acknowledging that the formation of any artistic work relies on combining various communicative languages and reference points to convey messages. Bouissac (2012) mentions that if we look at acrobatics and animal performance, the immediacy of a spectacle is enjoyable. Yet, if we look deeper, we can find an alternative way to appreciate this performance. For example, circus performance is linked to the rituals of the space of the ring, actions, storytelling, ideology, and physiology. Bouissac suggests that if we want to understand this relationship, we can take a look at circus history as well as anthropology (such as the darker aspects of animal treatment in circuses), language, semiotics, animal behavior and more. All of these elements help us to better understand circus performance. Regarding the modes addressed by multimodal discourse analysis, Rall (2009) argues that multimodal meaning is much more than the sum of its linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial and aural modes of meaning, it also involves processes of integration between modes. Iedema (2003) remarks that “the term multimodality was introduced to highlight the importance of taking into account semiotics other than language-in-use, such as image, music, gesture, and so on” (p. 33). A multimodal method of meaning making emphasizes the blurring of the traditional boundaries between language, image, page layout, and document design.

Text functions as a signifier of meaning to direct customers to further understand the idea of visual images. In examining an advertisement, text directs the viewer to a product promoted by the corporation. Yet, as Sturken and Cartwright (2001) note, most advertisements do not sell products, but promote a lifestyle or express the rationale of the brand. As such, many people buy these products because of their associations with, for instance, youth culture and female beauty, promises that will be fulfilled on purchase. Alongside such texts, are signs – as communicated through an image. These forms/signifiers are used in social interaction and become a part of the semiotic resources of a culture (Kress, 2010). Similarly, Rose (2012) acknowledges that signs can produce more than one potential meaning. Multimodal analysis thus entails integrating data from different modes of communication including verbal, visual, and auditory in constructing meaning (Ma, 2005).

The social semiotic analysis emphasizes understanding meaning in a social context, while multimodal discourse analysis focuses on deconstructing meaning according to different signs in the images. Activist artists, such as Ron English, employ strategies such as revising a few words in the commonly seen advertisements to subvert the corpocratic intent and reveal the

intention of the corporation. In order to understand how English creates meaning in his artworks, social semiotics can provide the tools to critically analyze how signs are embedded in social context. Multimodal discourse analysis is very helpful, which encourages viewers to connect different signs to construct meaning in the artworks.

### **Culture Jamming and Subvertising**

Corporocracy shines a light on how the pursuit of profit has pushed out any sense of morality, leaving a path of economic, environmental, and socio-political destruction across the globe (Arts and Culture Caucus, 2016). Activists use the skill of subvertising to deconstruct the intention of corporation. In this section of the article, I explore what the action of activist artists has done to reveal how corporations make the maximum profit through visual images to promote their product.

Culture jamming refers to a resistant movement situated within the field of anti-corporate activism (Wettergren, 2009). Moreover, culture jamming is linked with postmodern consumer culture. In other words, culture jamming is the act of resisting commercial culture in order to transform society and is embraced by groups and individuals who seek to critique and reform how culture is created and enacted in our daily lives (Sandlin & Milam, 2008). Furthermore, Chung and Kirby (2009) point out that culture jamming is a form of media activism driven by the idea that an advertisement is a promoting tool for accomplishing special interests. Culture jammers use various visual media including subvertisements and performances to unveil corporate hidden agendas. Culture jamming also includes such activities as billboard “literation,” the creation and dissemination of anti-advertising “subvertisement,” and participation in DIY (do-it-yourself) political theater and “shopping interventions” (Sandlin & Milam, 2010).

One of the central purposes of subvertising is to shock the viewer by juxtaposing easily recognizable images with shocking. By making subtle changes to corporate messages, it is possible to parody and satire even the biggest of multinational corporations. By hi-jacking their target customers, Corporations benefit from the millions of dollars spent on brand recognition and publicity (Bell & Goodwin, 2012). In other words, countercultures use “subvertising” to oppose the advertising industry’s role in maintaining the status quo (Hendley, 2009).

The aim of subvertising is to destroy corporations’ brand influences through parodies of familiar corporate advertising campaigns. It is primarily an attempt to make visible what corporations prefer to remain invisible (Smith-Anthony, & Groom, 2015). For example, an activist magazine named *Adbusters* is known for featuring parodies of mainstream advertisements and critique of consumer culture. *Adbusters* has launched its most ambitious

anti-branding campaign to sell blackspot sneakers, unassuming black canvas shoes with a large white spot on them intended for a corporate logo; the campaign serves to uncool the sportswear giant Nike by offering a generic alternative for customers (Harold, 2007). Adbusters is one of the avenues for anti-corporate activists to deconstruct the popular multimedia visual spectacles of corporate marketing.

van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) mention any image not only represents the world (whether in abstract or concrete ways), but also plays a part in some interaction and, with or without accompanying text, constitutes a recognizable kind of text (a painting, a political poster, a magazine advertisement, etc.). In other words, in order to effectively deconstruct the phenomenon of corpocracy, we need to explore how corpocracy affects our lives, including controlling the banking system, the kinds of food provided in the supermarket, and the insurance system. How does the corporation minimize information given with regards to the harmful impact of their work to maximize profit? In addition, multimodal discourse analysis assists the viewers to make sense among different signs in the images. In the following section of this article, English's activist subvertisements are used as illustrations of how corpocracy can be deconstructed through art, and how social semiotics can be employed to understand the function of such artworks.

### **Subvertising Corporate Construction through English's Work**

Subvertisements are commonly used by social activists and artists to deconstruct corporate branding and express their thoughts on the phenomena of corpocracy. Artworks by Ron English epitomize this tactic by appropriating a series of well-known commercial images to raise viewers' social consciousness of overconsumption or unhealthy consumption. English recreated different product packaging including cereal boxes, milk carton, and cigarette packs, to reveal its purposes in advertising. In his book, *Propaganda: The art & subversion of Ron English*, he mentions that he enjoys the parody style in magazines and social and political caricatures and uses this style to deconstruct the language of persuasion into parables that reveal the purposes in advertisements (English, 2004).

Ron English is one of the artists showing his artwork entitled "Corpocracy" (2015), at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, in Houston, TX. Ron English works on the theme of marijuana under the project of POPaganja. English works with marijuana's imagery and associations to humorously caricature recognizable brands and logos. English created the project of POPaganja because of his first visit to a bodega that was actually selling marijuana (Shi, 2016). English mentions that the marijuana use is a non-issue, and is generally accepted as a social norm. He points out that he wants to paint a picture of what things might look like after legalization of the recreational use of marijuana (Adams, 2016). English's Popaganja shop, designed for High Time magazine in New York City, exemplifies the inevitable

explosion in cannabis commerce. The temporary shop's purpose was to help visitors imagine what the bodega would display if marijuana is finally legalized (Turco, 2016), and is one of many marijuana advertisements included in the Corpocracy exhibit.

Using social semiotics to read English's arts is useful in this case because it emphasizes looking at different signs in a social context. The sign's meaning changes according to different people's perspectives. *Figure 1* presents a product packaging for Marijuana cigarettes. The following signs are depicted in *Figure 1*: a happy face emoticon with skull teeth replaces the golden crest logo of Philip Morris cigarette manufacturing company. In the top of the package design, English changes the original slogan "filter cigarettes" to "marijuana cigarettes." a few slogans are also added to the package: "breath free or die," "high life," and "since 2011."



*Figure 1. Marijuana Advertisement*, one part of the artwork of subvertisements in the exhibition. Photo taken by the author.

English's redesigned cigarette packaging encourages the viewer to consider whether smoking marijuana is a means to the 'high life'. Through this phrase, English employs a double entendre with one meaning serving as a sign to a high quality of living. A second meaning is

the implication of the pleasurable feeling one may get from getting ‘high’ from marijuana use. Yet, looking closer at the happy face emoticon with skull teeth, we can recognize that English ironically tells the viewers that marijuana cigarettes do not represent a good life even though both medical and recreational marijuana use has been legalized in numerous states. He draws attention to the many controversial issues associated with the use of marijuana in terms of its effect toward the public health system (Wilkinson, Yarnell, Radhakrishnan, Ball, & D’Souza, 2016). English’s use of these symbols provides an easy way to see the necessity of viewing signs from different personal perspectives, namely people might have different definitions of high life.

Multimodal discourse analysis assists us in further understanding how the artist constructs subverts meaning through different signs presented in an image. Multimodal discourse analysis emphasizes that signs are connected with each other and viewers should take a closer look at how signs interact with each other in the image. Looking at this product packaging, we can definitely understand that this is a marijuana product. The artist clearly mentions “marijuana cigarettes” in the upper part of this image. English also uses a statement, “Breathe free or death?” to ask the customer to consider whether smoking marijuana is a representation of high life. Also, the skull emoticon further encourages people to ponder whether smoking marijuana is one kind of high life.

Another thematic concern of English’s art has been obesity. English critiques the way that high calorie, sugary cereal products are marketed, particularly to children through the use of endearing cartoon characters with big eyes. Thus, English launched a counter-offensive with his Cereal Killers Series. In 2010, he placed his handmade boxes of “Fructose Peddlers,” “Yucky Children Charmer,” “Cocoa Puffed Paunch,” and “Captain Starch” into grocery stores in New York and Los Angeles. He thus employed the idea of ‘reverse shoplifting’, that is, the use of supermarkets and convenience stores as places to create an art experience (Hart, 2014). Using social semiotic theory and multimodal discourse analysis, students can also discern the subvertive metaphors in these breakfast cereal packaging. PoPaganda’s Cocoa Puffed Paunch (*Figure 2*) is an English parody of General Mills’ Cocoa Puffs breakfast cereal.

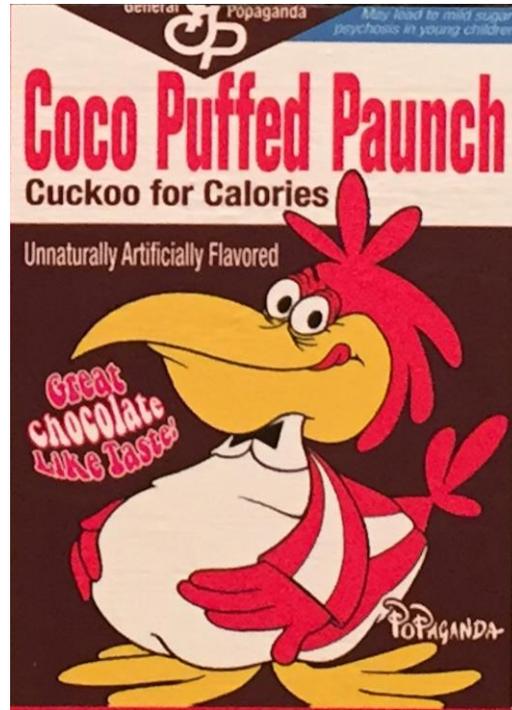


Figure 2. General Mills' Cocoa Puffs breakfast cereal package by Ron English, one part of the artwork of subvertisements in the exhibition. Photo taken by the author.

Firstly, comparing the slogans shown in the Cocoa Puffs package and the new packaging design by English, we can see that the name of the product was changed from “Cocoa Puffs” to “Coco Puffed Paunch.” Under the product name, the subheading of “The Chocolate flavor corn puffs” and its slogan appeared in its TV channel “Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs” becomes “Cuckoo for Calories” in English’s art. In the middle part of the package, “Free Inside! Bobbing Cuckoo Bird!” is replaced by “Great Chocolate Like Taste.” Also, “Unnaturally Artificially Flavored” was added on the top of the cuckoo. The main image is changed from a skinny size cuckoo holding a bowl of cocoa puffs to an overweight cuckoo sticking out her tongue and patting her belly, looking very satisfied with her breakfast. The image of the cuckoo in English art ironically warns people that if we eat too many unhealthy foods, our health will be negatively impacted.

Multimodal discourse analysis helps us further identify the intentions of the artist. For example, through the sentence, “Great chocolate like taste!” we know that the overweight cuckoo really enjoys her artificial chocolate flavor breakfast cereal. Additionally, the overweight cuckoo catches our attention when we glance at this advertisement because of its placement and size in the composition. If we connect the overweight cuckoo with the text “Cuckoo for Calories,” we feel a sense of ironic in this product packaging. English uses the image of cuckoo to represent people obtaining too many calories each day, which results in

weight gain and obesity.

Another widely recognized character modified by English is the mascot for the popular fast food chain McDonald's, Ronald McDonald. English called it "MC Supersized" for Morgan Spurlock's 2004 documentary *Supersize Me*. English argues that the "MC Supersized" mascot is what Ronald McDonald would look like if he actually ate at McDonald's (Hart, 2014). Social semiotics and multimodal analysis can also be used to analyze the sculpture of Ronald McDonald and Tony the Tiger, 2015 (Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Ronald McDonald and Tony the Tiger. Photo taken by the author.*

It is necessary to understand each character was originally introduced. We need to know the background information about the original image of Ronald McDonald and Tony the Tiger to effectively utilize these methods. They are originally slim rather than overweight. This information is very useful for us to understand the ironic meaning presented in this sculpture.

In 1952, a contest brought Tony the Tiger to the front of Sugar Frosted Flakes boxes nationwide, and has been the mascot for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes ever since. The cereal was marked as Sugar Frosted Flakes. When sugar started to get reputation for being unhealthy and leading to obesity, the decision was made to rebrand the cereal as Kellogg's Frosted Flakes (Retro staff, n.d.). Although the company has changed the name of the cereal getting rid of "Sugar," English encourages the viewers to question whether this cereal now has less sugar and is healthier. Has the number of calories in one bowl of cereal actually decreased? Has the grams of sugar decreased per serving?

Multimodal analysis requires us to take a closer look at every detail of the image. Therefore, we zoom into the details of this sculpture. Firstly, we discuss what can be seen in the cartoon figures' sculpture. We pay attention to the fine details of these two figures because even the smallest change is useful for the next step of discussion. For example, we can see that there is a big tag with the McDonald's logo and a text "Supersized" on Ronald McDonald's overalls. Also, Ronald McDonald is wearing an oversized silver dollar symbol around his neck. Furthermore, the image shows that the overweight Tony the Tiger is pointing to the dollar medal, implying attention to the commercial success of the franchise.

The silver dollar medal may catch the viewers' attention and encourages viewers to connect it with the hip-hop culture. In addition, the large body shape of Tony the Tiger may stand out in this image, because it looks different from the Tony that we see in the Kellogg's product packagings where he is full of energy who loves sports. However, this Tony the Tiger in English's art is overweight. This stark contrast satirizes issues of health from eating fast food by amplifying the two popular cartoon figures.

In conclusion, teachers can guide students to research the images of Ronald McDonald and Tony the Tiger in cartoon channels. Comparing this information with the artist's sculpture, students should be able to find the differences between these cartoon figures in cartoon channels and English's art. Using multimodal analysis pushes us to further read the intention of this artwork is to express the idea of commercial ethical issues. Many companies, such as McDonald's and Kellogg's, minimize the information of their high-calorie food in order to make maximum profit at the cost of public health. The artist uses his peculiar way to express the information to the viewers.

### **Conclusion and Implications for Art Education**

Corporations promote a large amount of unhealthy consumption through mass media, targeting younger population with their advertisements. Therefore, art teachers have the responsibility to introduce this visual method to students to strengthen their understanding of

images. In this case, through analyzing the phenomenon of corpocracy, students will improve their critical media literacy. In this article, I use Kress and van Leeuwen (2006)'s social semiotics method and the concept of multimodality to analyze visual images of corpocracy.

Ron English's activist artworks are a window for art teachers to foster students' critical media literacy. Teachers should view analyzing media culture as products of social production and struggle, teach students to be critical of media representations and discourses, and stress the importance of learning to use the media as a means of self-expression and social activism (Kellner & Share, 2005). In this article, I deconstruct Ron English's artworks using social semiotic and multimodal discourse analysis. Art teachers use this example to discuss with students how the artists actively push the development of democracy. In sum, teachers should be aware that social semiotic and multimodal discourse analysis can be used to deconstruct plenty of activism artworks and that using these methods can definitely improve students' critical media literacy. Fostering students' critical media literacy in art class will eventually equip students with a critical eye to be a responsible person in society.

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