Beyond the Music: Rethinking *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*

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Beyond the Music: Rethinking Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band

by

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Abstract : The critical discussion of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* has consistently been framed in terms of its importance as a record album. That is, remarks about its musical innovations and the ways it changed the culture of rock music dominate the conversation. When the album cover is mentioned, it is analyzed in terms of the symbiotic relationship it has with the musical innovation of the album itself. However, the discussion is changing; theorists Kenneth Womack and Todd F. Davis have examined the Beatles' relationship to critical theory, and music critic Ian Inglis explores the cultural work of the Beatles' album covers. Yet much of this criticism still focuses primarily on the relationship between music and image. In this paper I expand the discussion beyond its value to popular music and consider the album cover in three visual contexts: Pop Art, photomontage, and the history of album cover design. I argue that *Sgt. Pepper* marks a shift in how the image of the band performs a self-reflexive critique, both through the visual content of the image as well as the processes by which it was created. This destabilizes the album cover as a mere commodity or extraneous packaging. The confluence of Pop Art and photomontage enhances the critique, for these movements fundamentally engage with problematizing representation and the status quo through the appropriation of mass-mediated images.

Key Words: *Beatles – Sgt. Pepper – Pop Art – Photomontage – Visual Representation – Criticality*

Résumé : Les analyses critiques de *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* se sont constamment penchées sur son importance comme album. Ce qui les domine, ce sont des considérations sur ses innovations musicales et les manières dont il a changé la culture de la musique rock. Lorsque la pochette de l'album est mentionnée, elle est analysée à partir de sa symbiose avec l'innovation musicale de l'album lui-même. Toutefois, les termes du débats sont en train de changer : les théoriciens Kenneth Womack et Todd F. Davis ont examiné la relation entre les Beatles et la théorie critique, et le

critique musical Ian Inglis explore le travail culturel à l'œuvre dans les pochettes des albums des Beatles. Pourtant, une grande part de cette critique continue à se concentrer d'abord sur la relation entre musique et image. Dans cet article, j'étends la discussion au-delà de sa valeur dans les musiques populaires et je l'examine dans trois contextes visuels : le Pop Art, le photomontage et l'histoire du design de pochettes d'albums. Je considère que *Sgt. Pepper* marque un virage dans la façon dont le groupe effectue une critique auto-réflexive de son image, à la fois à travers le contenu visuel de la pochette et les processus de sa création, qui remettent en question le statut de la pochette comme simple marchandise ou élément superflu de packaging. La confluence du Pop Art et du photomontage renforce la critique, car ces courants problématisent fondamentalement la question de la représentation et le statu quo par l'appropriation de l'imagerie des médias de masse.

The making of Sgt. Pepper's Cover

Performing a basic internet search of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), tens of thousands of hits come up. All of the hits reference the album in either of two categories: as a musical project with unsurpassed innovations, igniting huge changes in the music industry, and the second – though ultimately related – as a commodity, a symbol of the Beatles and 1960s culture. In either case, the very prevalence of this image sketches out a framework for understanding the cultural relevance of not only the Beatles, but of *Sgt. Pepper* itself. Of all the Beatles' projects, this one garners more “air-time” and press than any other, perhaps because it is largely regarded as an album of “firsts”: the first gatefold sleeve, the first album to print lyrics on the cover, the first “concept album,” the first album to overtly declare involvement in the liberal psychedelia of the 1960s (Harry, 1992: 970). Whatever the reason, one thing is clear: *Sgt. Pepper* has become the gold standard for musicians, setting the bar high for musical innovation and distinctive cover art.

Any reading of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* seems to center on ambiguity. That is, the sense of confusion that pervades the 1960s has apparently seeped into analyses of its cultural artifacts. I say this because critics treating *Sgt. Pepper* point to the ways in which the album straddles two social positions at once: as a piece of pop culture, yet an intellectually provocative and obviously political text. When critics examine it, they tend to privilege the musical innovations over the visual elements. In “Covering Music: A Brief History and Analysis of Album Cover Design,” critics Steve Jones and Martin Sorger lament the dearth of scholarship about album covers, observing that the album cover “is never understood in purely functional terms, or as a form of graphic design” (1999: 68). Since “popular music has increasingly relied on visual style to present and sell itself” (Sorger and Jones, 1999: 68), they widely examine the conditions and production of album covers from their initial inception in the 1930s as protective coverings for the records, called “slicks,” to the proliferation of graphics and complex design elements in the 1960s. Sorger and Jones identify

the development of the LP (or long-playing record) in 1948 as the moment at which album covers became important elements of the record industry. Another important factor in the emergence of the album cover's development was the connection between early rock and the movies; many popular music icons, such as Elvis Presley, were also movie stars, and the album covers used the promotional tools of the movies – primarily photographs of the stars – to enhance their design.

Sorger and Jones identify photography as a key element of album cover design; the representational nature of the medium fits well with the purposes of the album cover, which, as Ian Inglis notes in “Nothing You Can See that Can’t Be Shown: The Album Covers of the Beatles,” were to protect the recording, to accompany the music, to advertise the band, and to serve as an object of purchase, a commodity (Inglis, 2001: 83). Photography helped sell the band and offer it up as a commodity; in doing so, album covers came to “stand in” for the band and the music inside. The band performs the music, but since we cannot purchase the band itself, we purchase their representation in the form of a photograph on an album cover. Sorger and Jones note, however, that the heavy dependence on photography began to wane as the 1960s drew to a close. Once psychedelic culture led to psychedelic art, “photography followed illustration and collage in explorations of new uses and combinations. Enigmatic images replaced the informative and documentary nature of the typical photographic album cover” (Sorger, Jones, 1999: 77). They read this shift as an important one in album cover design, for it began the trend we see today (77). This trend begins in earnest with *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, not only because it incorporated various visual elements in its design, but also because it did not rely on the “informative and documentary nature” of photography. Instead, Sorger and Jones claim, *Sgt. Pepper* depended upon *subverting* and changing those familiar tropes.

We can see how *Sgt. Pepper* changes the way we view photography just by looking at the crowd of people in the background. Before this groundbreaking album, photographs of the band members took center stage, both for records in general and for the Beatles. Images of the band members helped to solidify the connection between the music and the band; they put a “face” to the experience of listening. They also served as a way to “brand” the music. Record buyers learned to

associate the four Beatles—and their shaggy, mop-top haircuts, ankle boots, and collarless suits – with the music they produced. In some sense, album covers’ reliance on photography confused the relationship between music and image to the point of no return: it was virtually impossible not to immediately associate Paul McCartney’s charming smirk with his playfully saccharine “All My Loving.” However, *Sgt. Pepper* disrupts this notion by never showing a *photograph* of the Beatles on its cover. Though they appear in two different iterations on the cover, they are depicted as wax dummies – three dimensional representations that immediately contrast with the two dimensional photographs behind them – and the “real” Beatles themselves standing in the center of the crowd. Furthermore, the “real” Beatles are disguised as members of the fictional Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, sporting neon-colored satin jumpsuits. Both representations of the Beatles serve as distinct contrasts to the almost ghost-like cutouts of their “heroes,” and seem to suggest the limitations of photography in terms of their ability to represent reality. The photographic cutouts of heroes past and present do not offer the same kind of easy, immediate identification that the simple recognition of the Beatles permits. Rather, the Beatles themselves are almost lost in the sea of people, leaving the viewer to wonder whose record this is. The sheer complexity of the image alone requires a different kind of relationship between viewer and image, album and the band, representation and identity.

Ian Inglis draws our attention to the intellectual complexity via the album’s visual excess. Deeming *Sgt. Pepper* a “decisive moment in the history of Western civilization,” (Inglis, 2001: 87) Inglis highlights its importance as a “remarkable visual-musical correspondence” (87). Aside from its other innovations, Inglis describes the cover as the first to “specifically offer itself up as an object for overt investigation and analysis; identifying the figures [...] featured in the tableau became a popular game and an intellectual exercise” (92). For Inglis, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*’s major significance lies in the ways in which it invited the viewer/listener to enter into the album. Identifying the figures required an active gaze and scrutiny, which in turn required the viewer to have a personal stake in the image, instead of the more passive dismissal of it as accessory or accompaniment to the music it contained. In some sense, Inglis’ analysis leads us to believe that after *Sgt. Pepper*, album covers could become much more than accompaniments to music; they became social, political, and cultural critiques that required involvement from the audience.

Inglis's essay introduces three ways of reading an album cover that offer further insight into the visual innovations of *Sgt. Pepper*: as visual texts, as links between the visual image and the music, and as markers of influence within the musical community. Since much work has already been done on the latter two categories, I will leave them aside, and consider the album as a visual text. As such, *Sgt. Pepper* confers new identities on the band as members of the increasingly pervasive subcultural movements of the 1960s. Given the two depictions of the Beatles on the cover, we can understand that *Sgt. Pepper* marks the Beatles' "definitive break with the pop music industry" (Inglis, 2001: 87). Seen in this light, the album cover as visual text presents a kind of auto-critique, both of itself as commodity form, and as a representation of the band's identity.

The Beatles' understanding of their own cultural identity, both as pop stars and as musical artists with working-class roots, plays a large role in understanding the value of *Sgt. Pepper* as visual text. To borrow Kenneth Womack and Todd F. Davis' reading of *Sgt. Pepper* in "Mythology, Remythology, and Demythology: The Beatles On Film," the "album's cover depicts the group's former mythological selves standing stage right of their remythologized contemporary counterparts, themselves surrounded by similarly mythologized figures from the annals of history, religion, Hollywood, music, sports, and literature" (2006: 104). Womack and Davis also note that these "remythologized" depictions "prefigure the newly mythologized identities that the group would [later] bring to life," all the while "recognizing the constraints inherent in the mythologizing process itself" (104). When Womack and Davis refer to "mythology," they mean the self-aware and self-conscious manipulation of particular cultural identities – whether as super icons of the pop industry or pioneers of psychedelic counterculture – for the purposes of exposing their obvious complicity and their rejection of these identities. In short, Womack and Davis suggest that the Beatles underwent three stages in which their identity was at stake, and that they actively re-framed these identities according to their projects at the time. I invoke Womack and Davis because I believe it most effectively approaches the type of criticism I wish to perform, though it falls short in that it relies too heavily on the interaction between music and album cover.

Photomontage and the self-reflexive critique of representation

Specifically, I will explore the image itself in relationship to the conditions of its production. In essential terms, the process and origin of this image points to the ways in which it delivers its message. Because the cover depicts a performance on two levels – conceptually and visually – the album cover stages a critique of representation. Conceptually, the album cover’s staged concert involves the Beatles as performers and as audience members. The cover was conceived as a replacement for a concert, given by a fictional band, Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. As a staged event, the Beatles were literally selling a representation of their fictional performance. Visually, however, the image depicts the performance of photography and visual representation via the collage of people gathered around the Beatles. Titled “People We Like,” the image of the crowd depicts life-size photographic cutouts, which were then assembled and photographed against a blue background. In using a photograph of a photograph (which was then mass produced), the album cover is a representation of a representation. As a whole, however, *Sgt. Pepper* marks a shift in how representation plays an important factor in understanding the import of album covers in general.

Sgt. Pepper depicts how the image of the band became more performative on the album cover, which includes a self-reflexive engagement with visual representation in a kind of playful auto-critique. The overarching critique of representation also destabilized the notion of the album cover as mere commodity – though *Sgt. Pepper* engaged with this notion as well, by including cutouts and marketing the album as a package deal. The influence of photomontage and Pop Art, as essential design elements of the image, also work to destabilize the album cover’s connection to commodification, for both Pop Art and photomontage were already popular movements aligned with the cultural Left. Because each of these progressive artistic movements was incorporated as an intrinsic element of the album cover, the image has yet another layer of complexity to the critique of the representation and commodity. In general, the combination of the Beatles’ own artistic vision with the popular progressive allowed album covers to become sites for cultural critique. Through an exploration of these contexts, as well as *Sgt. Pepper*’s relationship to the design history of

album covers, I will attempt to show that album covers must be considered separately from their musical value and as sites of cultural, political, and social critique, which means they must be read apart from the all too common association with popular music.

Paul McCartney offers the best description of the album's theme: "Why don't we make the whole album as though the Pepper band really existed, as though Sgt. Pepper was doing the record?" (Harry, 1992: 970). Bill Harry claims that McCartney also conceived of having a "host of celebrities, living and dead, featured on the cover" (970). Though the Beatles' manager Brian Epstein and producer George Martin were initially skeptical, the Beatles insisted, and the result was, as Harry eloquently articulates, "the most famous cover of any music album and one of the most imitated images in the world" (971). For this groundbreaking cover, the Beatles assembled photographers Robert Fraser (who had already gained fame from his other Beatles covers) and Michael Cooper, and pop artist Peter Blake. Blake had previously done a piece on the Beatles in the early 1960s (Levy, 1963: 185), and was known for his interesting collages about pop icons such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. The team of Blake and Cooper set to work, asking the Beatles to write down their twelve most popular heroes throughout history, though the list grew to almost 70; 60 of which are depicted on the cover.

The montage of celebrities is arguably the most famous element of the cover, though the cover also makes use of various other interesting features. An ornate drum skin bearing the name "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" occupies the center place of the image, and the crowd is flanked by waxworks, stone garden statues, a flower arrangement spelling "Beatles" and another one in the shape of a guitar; a doll, and a cloth figure of Shirley Temple, and pepperonia plants (Harry, 1992: 977-8). All in all, the cover presents a complex visual tableau mixing photography, objects, figures, and even fabric (the psychedelic uniforms the Beatles are sporting as they pretend to be the members of Sgt. Pepper's band). Such visual complexity suggests that the image on the cover was not merely a throwaway package, but a visual artifact designed for a discriminating and increasingly critical audience. In short, this album cover represents the Beatles' first attempt at engaging with their fans in complex ways.

As many Beatles critics and scholars note, the Beatles were tired of touring by the end of 1965. However, in 1966 they committed themselves to several tours and concerts, with increasingly disastrous results. After their last concert at Shea Stadium in August of 1966, where the Beatles were almost electrocuted by a summer storm and accosted by screaming, agitated fans¹, they decided that their touring days were over. Thus, they turned to the studio and *Sgt. Pepper* was born. Bill Harry notes that *Sgt. Pepper* could turn out the way it did because the Beatles had more time to spend on developing their music and honing their craft, as they were no longer pressured to crank out hits for concerts or interrupted by other engagements (969). But the long hours in the studio did not mean that the Beatles had forgotten their fans; in fact, as many argue, their fans were foremost in their minds.

We can see evidence of this in the concept of the album. The very fact that the Beatles themselves were staging a mock concert by a fictional band implies that they were increasingly conscious of the value of performance and live music. Further, we can argue that the visual design of the album – a crowd facing an audience – presents itself as something to be looked at and observed, a performance, an interaction with the viewers. William M. Northcutt takes up the relationship between “the crowd” as depicted on the album cover, and the audience in “The Spectacle of Alienation: Death, Loss, and the Crowd in *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*.” Northcutt notes that part of the album’s cultural importance is that it “helped to perpetuate the idea that the summer of 1967 was a unique moment of social unity” (2006: 130); however, he suggests that instead, the Beatles had an increasingly antagonistic relationship to the crowd of fans: “*Sgt. Pepper* finds Lennon, McCartney, Harrison, and Starr retreating from the public that had so harassed them with Beatlemania and Beatle bashing” (131). He argues that this complex relationship inaugurated a “crisis of identity, which the Beatles tried to resolve on *Sgt. Pepper* – through new ‘readings’ of their

1. This is largely due to a series of controversies related to the Beatles, the most famous of which is John Lennon’s statement that the Beatles “were more popular than Jesus.” This comment resulted in a media frenzy and thousands of Beatles fans burning records. Though Lennon officially apologized, it seemed that the Beatles could not recover.

musical influences, newly developed philosophical ideals, the developing drug culture, and the world they wanted to change” (131). Essentially, Northcutt assures us, this album is “as much about separation and alienation as it is about unity” (131).

Northcutt also introduces the role of the masses as a central component of *Sgt. Pepper’s* overall message. He classifies the various meanings of the masses as the following: masses of record buyers, screaming Beatlemania (who, as Northcutt notes “buy records, but make real contact and real music impossible”), “enlightened but elite set of art appreciators and rock n’ rollers who were feeling the ‘vibes,’” and “unenlightened, moral and political hypocrites, supporters, and reproducers of restrictive mores and laws” – essentially, the proverbial establishment and its agents. These classifications demonstrate the complexity of the audience for whom the Beatles were performing, and they articulate the many layers of identity that the Beatles had to contend with as they staged their critique. In other words, the Beatles were well aware of the public for whom they performed, and they incorporated this awareness in their record cover. Perhaps the best evidence of this is the variety of the crowd of people depicted as their heroes. I will discuss the significance of this tableau in conjunction with photomontage, the medium used to construct it.

It is no surprise that changes or innovations in art result from changes in a political climate. Early Cubism reflects a shift in perception due largely to advances in film, industry, and transportation – distorting reality and, as a result, views of it. When the First World War ended, however, even this kind of representation, produced with paint and found materials, proved inadequate for representing the destruction of reality and the emergence of pervasive social ideologies. Photomontage is no exception to this rule. In her seminal work on photomontage, Dawn Ades traces the birth of this wonderfully complex movement as a subset of Dada in Berlin and the Soviet Union. Ades credits its development with a shift in perspective about the relationship between art and reality, which she describes as “a recognition of an attitude, which [Dadaists] all shared, towards their work and its relation to existing artistic hierarchies” (1976: 12). This attitude results from the knowledge that pictures could be “composed entirely of cut-up photographs...[so that] the image would tell

in a new way” (20). Ades notes that photomontage as a practice had been earlier associated with postcards, which combined different photographic images, text, and drawn pictures, as well as with the development of photography during the First World War: “aerial views, microscopy, and radiography” (20). But Ades emphasizes that photomontage generally originates from

“[...] an urgent need to move away from the limitations of abstraction without slipping back into antiquated illustrational or figurative modes. The photograph obviously has a special and privileged place in relation to reality, and is also susceptible of being manipulated to re-organize or dis-organize that reality. It is for this reason that it was in Russia, and in Berlin, where the impetus away from a predominately aesthetic movement towards social concerns was most marked, that photomontage made its appearance.” (Ades, 1976: 66)

In essence, the political turmoil paved the way for the disruption and manipulation of photographic reality. Ades observes that photomontage was becoming increasingly popular by “all political factions in Europe and Russia in the decades before the Second World War,” (41) though it is commonly associated with the political Left because “it is ideally suited to the expression of the Marxist dialectic” (41). She credits the “real” nature of photography as the driving force behind its political uses throughout Berlin and Russia during the years following the First World War. Since there seemed to be a strong need to reject figurative modes, the photograph became the political vehicle. These political collages were extraordinarily accessible, making the correlation between image and object, or image and message, painfully clear. Quoting Gustav Klutssis, Ades draws a connection between photomontage and “the development of industrial culture and of forms of mass cultural media” (63), which suggests its compliance with the political leanings of the Left, and explains its association with mass culture, class consciousness, and dissatisfaction with oppressive political agendas. Whatever the case, the shifts in perception caused by shifts in reality played a large role in forming a movement that would continue to metamorphose the political and artistic world for decades.

A quintessential principle of photomontage is that it juxtaposes photographic images to “reveal the ideology for exactly what it was, rendering visible the class structure of social relationships or laying bare the menace of Fascism” (Ades, 1976: 45). Different from collage, which collects artifacts, photography, and other images or objects to enrich the texture of an artistic work, photomontage combines several photographs and distorts them, or composes a tableau strictly from “found” images. A simple definition of photomontage is “manipulated photography” (17), but the term does not begin to explain the array of uses or practices of this technique. Cutting and pasting is a central technique, so that often the works appear jumbled, distorted, and chaotic. Ades argues that works of photomontage “transform relationships between familiar objects, upset the scale, suggest strange spatial effects” (17). John Berger also characterizes this sentiment brilliantly in his groundbreaking essay “The Political Uses of Photomontage.” He observes, “the peculiar advantage of photomontage lies in the fact that everything which has been cut out keeps its familiar photographic appearance. We are still looking first at things and only afterwards at symbols” (qtd in Ades, 1976: 48). Berger’s assertion points to the constant conversation between the things and their representations, or object and symbol, embedded in photomontage.

In particular, Berger’s statement characterizes the makeup of *Sgt. Pepper*, for the lifesize cutouts are merely photographs that represent, or in some cases only resemble, their “real-life” counterparts. Some are even unidentifiable – esoteric choices made by the band members – or obscured by other cutouts. Overall, however, the inclusion on the cover of various photographic images suggests not only a critique of the photograph’s ability to “tell” or represent reality (as I have already mentioned, the Beatles were not staging a “real” event at all) but also a critique of their value in society. That is, as we will see from an extended analysis of the role that photomontage plays on the cover, the cover calls attention to the many layers of representation in order to complicate the Beatles’ identity as popular icons. In fact, we might view the use of photomontage as a critique of identity itself, in that the Beatles were trying to refashion themselves – and the album cover – as vehicles for social and political change, as well as a way to access this change. Photomontage allows us to critique the discourses of identity, representation, performance, and reality; its heavy use on the cover, then, permits us to regard the cover as performing the same kinds of critiques that it does.

Unquestionably, the cover of *Sgt. Pepper* performs its critiques of representation on various levels, though the most important one for us here is the juxtaposition of the crowd with the two depictions of the Beatles themselves. The first images of the Beatles are waxwork models by Madame Tussaud, and they stand adjacent to the “real” Beatles, though these Beatles sport psychedelic, satin military uniforms. Immediately the viewer sees the contrast between the suited, “moptop” Beatles – the ghosts of Beatle past – and the present iteration. Northcutt has suggested that this contrast marks the change from performers to artists, from wax dolls to real people (2006: 132). However, in light of our discussion, I wish to add another idea into the mix: representation. That is, if we consider the two versions of the Beatles in relationship to the photomontaged crowd, a more nuanced critique of representation emerges, one that permits, in fact, almost requires, political considerations. Specifically, the use of photomontage enables us to view the band as a part of the political consciousness beginning to form (Northcutt, 2006: 129), and in turn to unpack the divide between high art and popular culture (135).

The cover juxtaposes political figures (such as T.E. Lawrence, Karl Marx, Gandhi, Einstein, and Carl Jung) with artists and entertainers such as Tony Curtis, Mae West, Lenny Bruce, Bob Dylan, Marilyn Monroe, and Sonny Liston. The cover also includes writers like W.C. Fields, Oscar Wilde, and Aubrey Beardsley. Such variety works in two ways to deliver the political critique of representation. First, the combination of more popular figures with political and cultural heroes debunks – or, at the very least, destabilizes – the status of the “elite” figures. It also destroys any sense of “real” history. Karl Marx is not a contemporary of Tony Curtis or even Oscar Wilde, yet he appears on the cover with the same kind of cultural value assigned to him. Allan Sekula’s “Reading an Archive” offers a useful way to understand how this occurs: “In an archive, the possibility of meaning is ‘liberated’ from the actual contingencies of use. But this liberation is also a loss, an *abstraction* from the complexity and richness of use, a loss of context. Thus, the specificity of the ‘original’ uses and meanings can be avoided, and even made invisible, when photographs are selected from an archive and reproduced in a book” (Sekula, 1987: 116). In other words, the archive necessarily “erases” the social, political, or cultural values of the original images, because

juxtaposition imposes what he calls “abstract visual equivalence” (117). In the case of *Sgt. Pepper*, Peter Blake and Robert Fraser bear responsibility for taking the photographs, and Madame Tussaud’s wax museum provided the wax figures of the Beatles – which not only the cover, but the receptions and interpretations of the cover – erase.

We can see further evidence of Sekula’s “abstract visual equivalence” when we examine the status of the figures on the album cover. Essentially, the status of the figures becomes enhanced by their placement next to cultural or literary icons. By including figures from various times, places, and positions, the cover implies that this kind of collection cannot represent reality, for once we determine who comprises the crowd, we immediately recognize the sheer impossibility of this event ever happening. In addition, the photomontage destabilizes the “rank” of the people shown because they exist on an essentially level playing field. No one figure usurps the other; though some are hidden, Blake notes that this was to enhance the reality effect rather than to make a statement about who is more important or influential. Thus, status or contribution becomes essentially irrelevant in determining value or importance. Sekula notes that the photos gain “new” meaning when they are collected and montaged together, as the “layout, captions, text, and site and mode of presentation” (117) affect how the viewer perceives the images. When we absorb this new context, we disrupt the “shock of montage” (117) because we lose the images’ original meaning or context. Sekula argues that we need to read archives “from below” (127) because “neither the contents, nor the forms, nor the many receptions and interpretations of the archive of human achievements can be assumed to be innocent” (127). Though we are not discussing a bona fide archive here, we still might read the photomontaged elements of *Sgt. Pepper* as a kind of popular archive, since it attempts a similar kind of critical engagement with the ways in which images can be deprived of their “inherent” meaning.

The other way in which photomontage delivers its critique of representation is through the Beatles’ relationship and position in the crowd. The inclusion of the Beatles themselves among the others places them on the same cultural level as the figures surrounding them. Just as time or historical moment becomes irrelevant, so too does “work” or occupation;

in other words, the Beatles become cultural workers and political figures in the same way as Bob Dylan or Karl Marx had already done. Even more interesting, however, is the fact that the Beatles are not photographs, but “real” people: even their waxwork dummies were placed in front of the collaged photograph. The sheer complexity of the image and the representations of the Beatles within the crowd (three, in essence: the Beatles as waxwork dummies, as members of Sgt. Pepper’s band, and as invisible musical artists as represented by the name “Beatles” in flowers) wages a critique of their own image. However, it also critiques the ways in which the Beatles themselves became icons and celebrities up for commodification. That is, because the album is not a simple photograph of the group members themselves, it suggests two things: first, these kinds of covers were inadequate for delivering their political message; and second, that it was time to critique the notion of commodity in the first place. In one sense, the Beatles exploited the idea of the commodity – a concept I will discuss in greater detail later as I examine the relationship between the cover and Pop Art – through their careful and gimmicky packaging. However, the use of photomontage aligns itself with critique of commodities through its alliance with the cultural Left – an association that was already commonplace. Thus, the use of photomontage enabled a critique of representation (as Ades and Berger discuss) as well as a critique of identity politics and the role that commodities play in shaping them.

Pop Art and the critique of commodity

Like photomontage, Pop Art was largely a response to political and social conditions of post-war Britain, and it shares its political leanings to the Left with photomontage. As a “rebellion against the art establishment” (Livingstone 146), Pop Art had lasting themes of sex, technology, entertainment, and the mass media. Begun by a small group of artists at the London College of Art in the 1950s called the Independent Group, Pop Art became a response to bourgeois art forms that necessarily emphasized a “hierarchy of values formulated by the upper classes” (Livingstone, 1991: 146). The earliest members of the Independent Group – including Richard Hamilton and Peter Blake – were staunchly committed to the

Pop Art mission, and bent on making their statements, as Marco Livingstone notes, in a “plain-speaking language born of a democratic impulse stirring their society at large” (146). In this sense, Pop Art also shares with photomontage the commitment of delivering art that responded to the need for social reform, as well as keen observations about social politics.

But Pop Art is markedly different than photomontage for several reasons, and the largest difference is that it overtly celebrated popular culture. This celebration, as it were, was not to be confused with the “semiological decodings of the social, political, or economic subtexts of particular imagery” (Livingstone, 1991: 147) – as photomontage could do – but rather emphasized the technological production of everyday objects. Pop Art began in earnest through an exhibit by Richard Hamilton, entitled “Just What Is It That Makes Today’s Homes so Different, So Appealing?” and this exhibit introduced the source material of Pop Art: photography, television, advertising, comic strips, the cinema, muscle-men magazines, consumer products, and brand names (148). Dedicated to providing a “kaleidoscopic view of culture” (148), this exhibit (and Pop Art in general), offered an inside look into the products dotting our everyday experiences, and offering them up as sites of critique, irony, and even parody. Within Pop Art, then, lies an inherent criticality—its goal was for artists and viewers to not only see everyday objects as “art,” but also to critique longstanding traditions of the art establishment. Livingstone notes that in an interview, Andy Warhol declared he wanted to be a machine, not an artist, for machines could reproduce myriad images that were exactly alike, and this fact was a key part of Warhol’s message. He wanted to expose the ways in which art could be manufactured, reproduced, manipulated, taken out of the bourgeois realm to fit an urban lifestyle (160).

Another artist with Warhol’s fascination in mind, Peter Blake, had a unique relationship to Pop Art. In an interview with Mervyn Levy, Blake admits that for him, Pop Art “is often rooted in nostalgia: the nostalgia of old, popular things. And although I’m also constantly trying to establish a new pop art, one which stems directly from our own time, I’m always looking back at the sources of the idiom” (Levy, 1963: 185). Blake’s comment here represents a key tenet within the Pop Art community at large, though it was revised by the more

popular members as the movement progressed. Blake's nostalgia inspired him to include postcards, photographs, store-bought items, and found objects into his compositions – items bearing no evidence of his handiwork at all. Levy sums up Blake's artistic vision: “for Blake, Pop Art, like pop music, is fundamentally an illusion. Both are concerned with states of illusion that spring, respectively, from popular sounds and popular images. Illusionistic moods are the essence of Pop Art” (185). The emphasis on illusion, Livingstone notes, was supposed to reveal the process by which art was created, and the desire for the popular came out of the democratic, mass-cultural idiom the artists shared. But Blake's own assessment of his projects also provides another important window into the overall project of Pop Artists: that the art could be enjoyed by everyone, especially young people, because they were, in his view, more receptive to the innovations put forth by pop music and more acutely aware of the social conditions surrounding Pop Art's inception.

Blake's association with the Beatles had its origins early in their careers even before they became superstars. Because Blake drew the connection between pop music and Pop Art, musical icons were often the subject of his works. Levy reports that Blake regarded the Beatles as the icons of pop: “The Beatles symbolize the vast popular culture from which Pop Art so largely derives its sources of inspiration” (188). In his first project about the Beatles, which Blake described as a conversation piece, Blake wanted to emphasize the connection between the Beatles and their urban environment – Liverpool – as well as deliver a “visual significance that will somehow match the mood of Beatle music” (187). Already we can see how Blake's vision gels with the thrust of *Sgt. Pepper*, for the album cover – as Sorger and Jones remind us – essentially “sells” and reflects the mood, tone, or quality of the music inside. Though Blake's 1963 piece about the Beatles was not an album cover, the use of pop music artists in his art foreshadows the confluence of popular icons with historical, political, and social figures on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper*. Because Blake was so committed to nostalgic “admass” – a term Levy employs to describe the Pop Artists' vision, and refers to the advertising mass culture – it makes sense that he turn to the Beatles for what is arguably his most famous work.

The ideas of nostalgia form an integral component of the Beatles' play with identity. Their double appearance on the cover might suggest a complex re-figuring of their professional image, as well as an equally complex nostalgia for the more carefree, earlier days as performing artists. We can see this represented by the wax dummies of the Beatles juxtaposed with the contemporary, psychedelic-clad counterparts. The juxtaposition of the "real" band members (though disguised) with the life-like wax models calls attention to not only their revised identities, but also to the ways in which the image of the Beatles themselves had come to constitute a commodity. If we take Womack and Davis at their word, that the Beatles "remythologized" their image on *Sgt. Pepper*, we see how nostalgia for their previous identity becomes imbricated in this remythologizing. But Womack and Davis do not consider how the use of Pop Art enhances the Beatles' playing with identity as commodity; their essay focuses on how the music and the album cover interact. Thus, I will turn to what I believe is the most important aspect of the album cover – the critique of the commodity – in relationship to Pop Art.

As William Northcutt observes, the Beatles on *Sgt. Pepper* "sensed the contradictions inherent in their part of the spectacle: they were at once protesting aspects of capitalism while promoting a product of image and music to be sold and accepted" (2006: 132). This accurately describes the ways in which the album both mocks – however playfully – and subscribes to the commodity fetish. It is important to note here that the use of Pop Art enhances this association, as Pop Art's manifesto seems to perform the same kind of ideological critique. The album's packaging is the clearest association with Pop Art as well as with the Beatles' engagement with, and critique of, the record as commodity.

Northcutt observes that the "packaging of *Sgt. Pepper*, its gatefold sleeve, cardboard cutouts, and printed lyrics were the first in the industry, and they were a concerted effort to sell the product to the masses" (135). However, Northcutt also claims that the "cover's printed lyrics indicated the Beatles' self-confidence as artists, and it indicated a desire to preach to the masses – to praise and condemn them for their parts in the spectacle" (135-6). We can use his observations about the album's packaging as a way to illustrate the complex rela-

tionship the cover has to commodification. That is, each of the innovations he lists pays lip service to Pop Art's fascination with everyday life and commodity culture; though as a whole they do much more than merely "sell" the band. Instead, the sheer innovation of the cover, its "newness" and, we might say, shock value, also require the consumer to be an active participant in its message.

Just as the tableau of figures became an intellectual exercise, inviting the viewer/listener to "enter into" the image, the cutouts and gatefold sleeve duly call for a similar type of action. Furthermore, the cutouts can stand separately from the record itself; they can be used for other purposes than listening or viewing. By including "toys" as part and parcel of their album cover, the Beatles not only engage with critiques of the commodity, but they force their album cover to occupy the same "space" or position as Pop Art. In other words, the association with Pop Art was already recognized, and when purchased, *Sgt. Pepper* could be considered a piece of art. Furthermore, Pop Art also invited its viewers/consumers to critique everyday life at the same time it offered it up for sale.

Unquestionably, *Sgt. Pepper* offered itself as a commodity, for in the final analysis it is a record album. We might still say that the cover is, indeed, an accessory to the music, with a symbiotic relationship to the innovations of the Beatles' songs and or their own political leanings. Even if this is the case, we must still recognize that to include cardboard cutouts and obvious "gimmicks" – a new fold, the lyrics, the bright colors, and the "new" Beatles – requires a self-awareness that cannot be overlooked. The very packaging of the album *as a package* and as a new kind of recording, enforces the critique of the commodity, for it implicitly asks consumers what they are purchasing. Are consumers purchasing the album for its music? Its gimmicks? Its shock value? Its association with the Beatles? Its *difference* from the Beatles? The question itself becomes irrelevant; the bottom line is that through the visual excess and overall commitment to subverting the status quo, this album cover requires cooperation and participation from the consumer in ways that previous album covers could not do in the same way. Just as the intellectual exercise of identifying the figures collaged in the background became an intellectual game, and thus

an invitation to the viewer/listener to enter into the visual experience of the album cover, the packaging and re-framing of identities similarly urges the viewer/listener into her own kind of auto-critique. The association with Pop Art only enhances this self-reflection, for it was obvious at the time that Pop Artists like Peter Blake were taking up these questions in their work.

High and low culture

I have been arguing throughout this paper that *Sgt. Pepper* marks a definitive moment in album cover design and history, for it performed, on many levels, a critique of representation. Now I wish to complicate this reading even further by suggesting that if we are to recognize the critical potential of this album cover, we must consider it separately from the context of popular culture. This is not to say that an album cover does not operate in the popular realm, nor that it is not primarily an object designed for mass consumption. Rather, I am suggesting that *Sgt. Pepper* specifically, and album covers in general, should be read as texts with prominent and irrevocable ties to critiques of the status quo in similar ways that critical theory posits.

In “The Rest of You, If You’ll Just Rattle Your Jewelry: The Beatles and Questions of Mass and High Culture,” Paul Gleed observes that “the music of the Beatles was, in short, high art for the mass public” (2006: 161). While his observation pertains specifically to the music, we can also see how it pertains to the album cover as well. Gleed suggests that this observation “seems to represent the dominant way of understanding the Beatles’ position between ‘the people in the cheap seats’ and ‘the rest’” (161). Further, the Beatles can be “viewed as instrumental in challenging and dissolving such traditional and restrictive categories as ‘high art’ and ‘mass culture’” (162), because they actively worked to make their music – and their message – accessible to all audiences. Moreover, the critiques of their own roles in the process, evident especially on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper*, make manifest their overarching critique of such categories as high and low.

Though Gleed's distinction about high art and popular art seems sufficient, Leslie Fiedler also offers evidence as to why we should consider popular artifacts like album covers as sites of critique. In his seminal essay, "Cross the Border, Close the Gap," Fiedler comments that

"[...] to turn High Art into vaudeville and burlesque at the same moment that Mass Art is being irreverently introduced into museums and libraries is to perform an act which has political as well as aesthetic implications: as an act which closes a class [gap], as well as a generation gap...what the final intrusion of Pop into the citadels of High Art provides, therefore, for the critics is an exhilarating new possibility of making judgments about the "goodness" and "badness" of art quite separated from distinctions between "high" and "low" with their concealed class bias." (Fiedler, 1977: 287)

Here, Fiedler observes how popular texts or artifacts seem to inherently resist simple classification, if for no other reason than they are frequently taken up by audiences outside their original scope. This is exactly the scenario of Pop Art, causing many famous Pop Artists to lament that their critique was being overshadowed by inclusion in museums and co-opted by the bourgeois standards of taste that essentially commodified it (Livingstone, 1991: 150). Fiedler points to the inadequacy of such binaristic categories as "good" and "bad" or "high" and "low," suggesting instead that they make their aesthetic evaluations without considering these categories as informative or even relevant.

Gleed points out that Fiedler's assessment of the post-modern situation owes a great debt to the Beatles: "the point, of course, is not that the changes in cultural thinking, the dissolution of the boundaries between 'high' and 'mass' culture, are driven entirely by the Beatles, but that no one else can claim to have done more to create that environment" (2006: 163). Noting that "the Beatles worked upward...from the popular position" (164), Gleed points to *Sgt. Pepper* as the moment in which the distinctions between "high" and "mass" cultures converged, for critique was so deeply embedded in the music that it was impossible to ignore. The same is true for the critique – from the bottom, as it were – entrenched in every facet of the cover art: photomontage, Pop Art, and active engagements with the commodity. As it has been over forty years since the album's release, we must be aware of our own assumptions regarding the Beatles' legacy. It is at this moment that reassessments of value and categories are the most relevant.

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