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How does Banksy use satire in his artwork to challenge societal norms?

“Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable,” a line once said by Mexican poet Ceasar A. Cruz, which was later echoed by famous street artist Banksy (4 Ways). Banksy has been using his artwork to promote activism for various causes since he started in the early 1990s (Banksy: What Do We Know). He is known for his unique style, frequently criticizing society with the outlandish themes and ideologies portrayed in his artwork. Banksy has argued against commonplace societal problems in his painting of an old man in a bathtub, “The Falling Shopper,” his painting of birds on a wire, and his Steve Jobs refugee mural. In his artwork, Banksy uses satire to challenge how society normally perceives the ideas of war, capitalism, and immigration or race and equality issues.

In the midst of the Ukraine war, Banksy painted seven new art pieces around the war-torn country (Shaw, Anny). One Ukrainian piece that has received strong recognition depicts an old man taking a bath (Laboureau, Sebastien. Banksy). It is painted on the wall of a collapsed apartment building, where the audience would likely expect a bathroom. The image is fully in black and white, potentially suggesting that the man may have died in the war or at least implying that the man is only a memory or afterthought due to black and white imagery commonly associated with flashbacks or

older films. At first glance, the piece seems humorous as it depicts such an innocent and somewhat gleeful activity, but further understanding the context of the war and the number of lives lost gives the artwork an ironic and dark twist. What once seemed to be a playful image, in reality, represents the lives that were torn



apart by war. It also makes the audience feel guilty for viewing it as Banksy forces an invasion of the old man's privacy. This unwanted insight into the man's private activities literally symbolizes the walls that have been torn down due to the war. Understanding the detriments of the war allows the viewer to perceive the true meaning of the piece; Banksy emphasizes the lost innocent lives and challenges the governments of these war-torn countries through an otherwise ordinary and humorous image. Banksy's use of satire through irony and humor in this piece serves as a reminder of the cost of conflict, allowing him to effectively mock the integrity of the war and help spread awareness of the detriments of war.

Banksy also uses satire to challenge the Westernized societal views of capitalism. Consumer culture and the idea of a perfect capitalistic society are common themes in Western countries. As evident through his artwork, Banksy has taken issue with these ideologies. One primary example of his anti-capitalistic work is "The Falling Shopper," also known as "Shop Till You Drop" (Laboureau, Sebastien. Falling Shopper). Banksy depicts a woman clutching a half-filled shopping cart as she seemingly falls from a significant height. In his piece of an old man taking a bath, the artwork is placed directly where a bathroom would likely be found. This is not the case for "The Falling Shopper." Rather than placing it on the wall of a shopping mall, Banksy painted it

towards the top of a very tall office building. The woman clutches her shopping cart as she falls through the air. The height of the artwork emphasizes her desire for



materialistic items because as she falls from a fatal height, she is more focused on her shopping cart than her own well-being.

Banksy's commentary suggests that people in our modern society will go as far as to risk their own lives to gain or hold onto

monetary value. While this idea is generalized and exaggerated,

Banksy suggests that society values objects rather than putting emphasis on genuine connections among individuals. This form of satire, through defied anticipations and exaggeration, allows Banksy to challenge the societal norms of capitalism. While anti-capitalism is common in Banksy's art, he has challenged many other questionable societal beliefs.

Another common societal norm that Banksy challenges is the treatment of immigrants and issues of race inequality. In a 2014 election in Clacton, voters had the opportunity to vote for a member of a new political party known as the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) (Banksy Wanted Clacton). The party is upfront with its anti-immigration values, believing that immigration in the United Kingdom is "out of control" (UKIP Policies). In response to the newly formed party, Banksy created a piece to mock their views. He painted six birds sitting on a wire, five of which were gray and holding up xenophobic signs towards the single green bird. The signs read "MIGRANTS NOT WELCOME," "GO BACK TO AFRICA," and "KEEP OFF OUR WORMS." The provocative writing mimics the beliefs of the right-winged party UKIP but substitutes some words for language that would be more common for birds. Rather than saying,

“Keep off our land,” Banksy opts for “Keep off our worms.” The use of bird vernacular makes fun of anti-immigration values. Banksy uses the grey birds to mock UKIP, mimicking some of their promoted values towards immigrants.

The satirical use of birds instead of humans points out the ridiculousness of UKIP’s beliefs and challenges society’s treatment of immigrants. This substitution is perfect as there are



many different bird species that could be related to our racial diversity, but of course, birds do not suffer from racism as our society does. The use of ironic color juxtaposition is also utilized to criticize race issues further. Banksy makes the green bird the most salient symbol in the image as it is the only one with color. Since the green bird is utilized to represent immigrants, Banksy’s color choice puts immigrants in the spotlight instead of omitting them from the picture, which is more commonplace for our modern society as immigrants are oftentimes overlooked. Banksy’s Clacton bird mural provides a phenomenal example of the use of satire through mockery and irony to battle xenophobia, but it is not the only way Banksy has done so.

Banksy also promotes immigration-friendly values in his Steve Jobs refugee mural. In a refugee camp in Calais in 2015, Banksy painted a very accurate portrayal of Steve Jobs, the founder of the technology company Apple, with a bag slung over his shoulder and an old computer in his hand (*Steve Jobs’s Father*). Pro-immigration ideas are further explored as Banksy mocks the common societal belief that immigrants steal jobs and drain the economy of other countries. The mural depicts Jobs as a refugee, emphasizing his ancestry, as his father immigrated from Syria. While Jobs seems out of place in this situation, Banksy places the icon of wealth and status in a poor

environment to ironically critique the fears of immigration and also comment on the impacts of immigration on Steve Jobs and furthermore Apple. Without the possibility of immigration, Steve Jobs would never have ended up in America, and Apple, which was



deemed the most profitable company in America in 2021

(Pereira, Daniel), would never have existed. While a majority of society associates immigration with unwanted competition in the workforce, Banksy once again deviates from expectations

through the use of the tech giant CEO to emphasize the benefits of immigration to the workforce. As seen commonly throughout his work, Banksy uses satire through mockery and deviated expectations to challenge further the anti-immigration beliefs and racist values that are commonly seen in society today.

Overall, satire is commonly used by Banksy in his artwork to mock and challenge societal norms and to help promote activism regarding commonplace issues. In his body of work, anti-war, anti-capitalist, and pro-immigration themes are frequent and help to emphasize the importance of social advocacy. Through many satirical strategies such as exaggeration, irony, mockery, and deviated expectations, Banksy crumples the negative beliefs of society and effectively promotes activism that is usually overlooked by the general public.

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