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**Art or argument: Exploring the power of semiotics in
craftivism through the work The Last Supper by Julie Green.**

By

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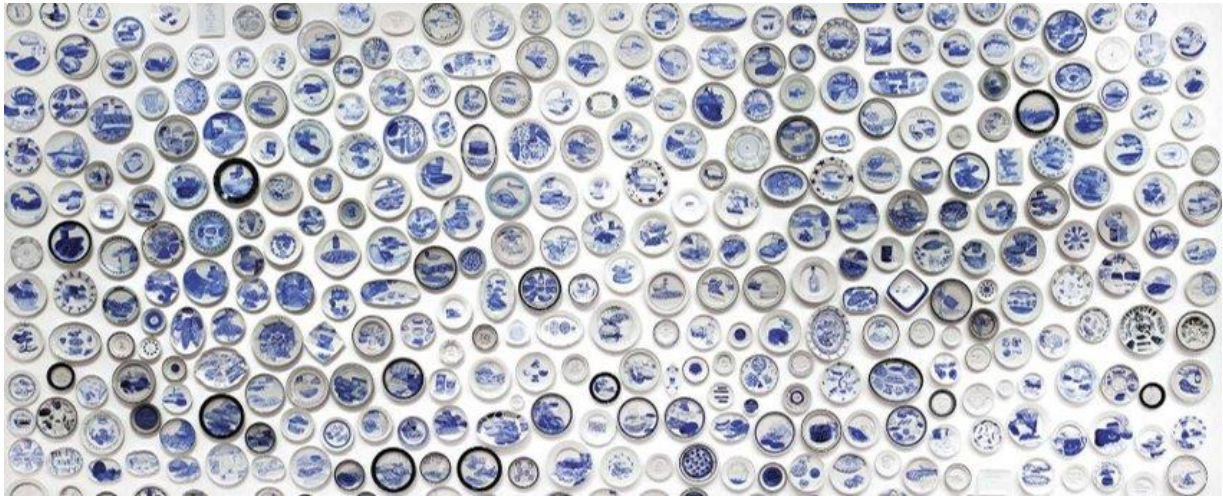


Figure 1 Green, J. *The Last Supper - Final Meals of U.S Death Row Inmates* (2017) Painted ceramic plates. Bellevue Arts Museum, Washington, USA

Painter Julie Green's work *The Last Supper* (2000-2021) is a collection of hand-painted blue and white plates that make commentary on capital punishment in the USA by depicting images of the final meals of death row inmates. Green has skilfully deployed semiotics to create layers of meaning in *The Last Supper* in a way that effectively challenges its viewers to deeply contemplate the subject of capital punishment. The gentleness of this approach demonstrates how craft can be used in activism to effectively promote social change.

To investigate how *The Last Supper* can be understood using semiotics, this essay will demonstrate how meaning can be interpreted from a selection of the plates using the theoretical frameworks outlined by Sonja Andrew, with reference to the earlier works of structuralist and poststructuralist philosophers such as Saussure, Barthes, and Foucault.

Semiotics is the term used to describe a collection of theories about signs and symbols and their use in creating and receiving meaning. "Saussure's definition of the sign may be generalised in such a way that it applies to more than the linguistic sign. So, whilst the sign is still made up of two parts according to the more general definition, the signifier is anything that stands for or represents something else, and the signified is the something else that is being represented." (Barnard, 1996: 81 as quoted in Andrew, 2008).

"To the things themselves!" as the phenomenologists would say, that is; to first explore the work purely for what it is in this place in time, before seeking to interpret any layers of experienced meaning accrued through our lived cultural and individual experiences (Heidegger). Green's work comprises of 1000 glazed white ceramic plates of various ages, commercially sourced by the artist in the USA. Some of these plates already bear decorative cobalt blue glazes, in what is known as the 'flow blue' style. Green has depicted images of food, and sometimes further decoration and text, before having them refired. The plates are then displayed en masse in various galleries, public buildings, and other venues in the USA. Works for this collection began in the year 2000, and the

final pieces were added in 2021. By investigating what the work is, and what it is not, we can begin to interpret its meaning.

Sturken and Cartwright proposed three reader positions of decoding meaning, the first being the “dominant hegemonic reading.” (Sturken and Cartwright)

The blue and white plates could be seen to have a connoted meaning of domesticity and history, and the signified interpretation, or “myth” that we are expected to read into this would be the nostalgia of grandparent's houses and formal dinners on the 'best' plates. When seeing that these are the last meals of prisoners, it has a jarring effect, tapping into subjective opinions about capital punishment, individual experiences of crime and justice either as perpetrator, victim, or family. The food that is referenced evokes further feelings and understanding about class, race, place, cultural groups, taste, poverty and wealth, aspirations; everyday lives – we start to read these cues to build a picture of the people behind the meal all while contemplating the juxtaposition posed by something uncomfortable with something familiar. The dominant meaning is thus generally understood to be a critique of capital punishment, which could then be interpreted as a form of activism (or craftivism) in that it challenges the western reader to think about the status quo and their support or opposition of crime and punishment. It has been noted that since Green started making and exhibiting the work, support for the death penalty in the USA has declined. It was the painter's intention to add 50 plates a year either until 1000 plates were reached, or the death penalty was abolished, which we can infer to mean their position is opposed to capital punishment. (Green).

Although the widely accepted meaning is as a critique of the death penalty the artist does not acknowledge this as such a clear-cut thing. In response to the criticism that the work triggers sympathy towards murderers and other dangerous criminals, Green has said that the work is to be interpreted “as an art piece, not an argument.” (Scott, 2021). This is interesting as it challenges the other two proposed positions of reader decoding; negotiated and oppositional; the artist is actively inviting these other interpretations, further challenging the reader to interact with and interpret the work in their own way, encouraging a true ownership of their own views rather than an acceptance of the hegemony. (Sturken and Cartwright 2000).

"In collecting the menus, I do see information about the crime," they once told the Houston Chronicle. "While painting each plate, I am painfully aware of the suffering it represents, starting with the victim, their family, the inmate, the inmate's family, and the slight possibility of error that the person executed was innocent." (Green as quoted in Scott 2021)

This allowance of reader interpretation was proposed by Barthes: “rather than thinking of the text as...a thread from author to reader, Barthes sees it as open-ended. The reader is no longer a passive receiver of meanings, is also a producer of meanings within his or her own right, and joins the author as a weaver of texts.” (Barnett et al 2003: 3-5, in Andrews, 2008 p45).

The power of this work as a piece of activism is interpreted through its subject matter and context, but further nuance and layers of meaning that can be decoded through the framework of Sonja Andrew. Below, we will explore meaning encoded in imagery, the use of text and symbology, visual language, and material technique. Andrew draws on the earlier idea of Saussure and Barthes signifiers, but further breaks these down into the various categories that can be created or read for meaning. (Andrew, 2008).



Figure 2 Green, J. Detail from *The Last Supper: Indiana* 05 May 2007. Pizza and birthday cake shared with 15 family and friends. A prison official said, "He told us he never had a birthday cake so we ordered a birthday cake for him." 7 x 12 in. Platter. 2007

The imagery utilised by Green in Fig 2 includes soft blue and white colour, hand painted images and hand stamped text. Blue signifies coolness, calm, and at a deeper level something regal and important as seen in the highly prized and replicated ceramics from the far east. This is further signified in the traditional pattern around the oval platter, it stands out as important. From this we read status and domesticity, with deeper levels of interpretation exploring individuality and self-worth. The naïve, childlike drawing of a birthday cake taps into a widely understood cultural narrative, evocative of personal memories of birthdays, childhood and feeling special.

The text adds further meaning and context by providing a literal narrative as well as a decorative function that draws the eye, the reading of the text compounds the weight of the message behind the image, for most, it evokes pity, and raises a question – does childhood deprivation go on to create criminals?



Figure 3 Green, J. Detail from *The Last Supper Utah* 15 October 1999. Regular prison menu. 7 in. Dessert plate. 2005.

In contrast in fig 3 see how the artist has used text to highlight the absence of choice and freedom afforded this inmate in three simple words in cobalt blue type font - "regular prison menu". This choice of plain text with no image could signify that this is a mundane, ordinary occurrence, which is shocking when considered alongside the overall subject matter of a human life being ended – inferring that it is disposable, forgettable, ordinary, unworthy of special treatment. In other plates created with the same subject, the words “no choice” are sometimes used. If they had been given a choice, what narrative would that choice convey?



Figure 4 Green, J. Detail from The Last Supper North Carolina 20 January 2006. McRib sandwich from McDonald's, a double cheeseburger from Wendy's, macaroni and cheese, cheesecake, and a Pepsi. 11 in. Dinner plate. 2007

This plate in Fig 4 is heavy with symbology. A 'symbol' in Pierces model of semiotics, is a "learnt sign," it is arbitrary, and only understood through convention. (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: p28). The rendering of a meal from infamous fast food brand McDonalds alongside stars which could be read to represent the "Stars and Stripes" and the hegemonic culture of the United States and the perceived freedom and justice that offers its inhabitants. A powerful image in a culture which worships both the flag and capitalism. Fast food means different things to different people, so it is an interesting plate to interpret. Some may see this and think of freedom of choice, of comfort food, a bit of the outside world afforded to the inmate. Others may be more critical, seeing the stranglehold capitalistic fast-food chains have over those who struggle in poverty and poor education, a demographic which makes up a substantial portion of the prison population. Foucault would see these topics as the 'discourses' that can be decoded and negotiated in the artwork, and through the process of deconstructing these meanings we begin to reveal their power.



Figure 5 May, C. *Unhappy Meal*. 2018. Silkscreen, Cardboard. 13.5 x 13 x 19.5cm. Edition 30+2AP

The commentary surrounding criticism of fast-food culture in the west is well documented among other artists, as seen in Fig 5 *Unhappy Meal* by Carol May. This theme could also be interpreted as a form of activism and is one of the intertextual layers of meaning that feeds this body of work. Like Greens work, in Fig 6 Lei Xue has deployed the same blue and white references juxtaposed with fast food analogies and disposability, but for him, “blue is the colour of hope” (Xue). The intertextuality that the work taps into will be further explored below.



Figure 6 Xue, L. *Drinking Tea*. Ongoing project since 2001[2021]. Hand painted porcelain, variable dimensions. Galerie Hubert Winter, Austria.



Figure 7 Green, J. *The Last Supper - Final Meals of U.S Death Row Inmates (2017)* Painted ceramic plates. Bellevue Arts Museum, Washington, USA

The predominant visual language when viewing the whole collection of plates is one of uniformity; again, inferring the unremarkable and domestic. Blue and white ceramics, once a status object, are now commonplace and easy to dismiss. Only when a closer look is taken do we notice the irregularities, each plate is a slightly different shape and size, some are small and round, some large and oval. The display itself is not uniform, although from a distance it looks as though a pattern may exist. At an individual level we see the plates are all entirely unique in their shape, size, and decoration. When reading the visual language as a representation of the inmates, could we interpret this as a prison population? Something that exists everywhere, overlooked, just like plates. They seem the same, performing their function or serving their time, but when you look closely at their unique choices and qualities, they become individual with stories and nuances.



Figure 8 Green, J. *Detail from The Last Supper Exonerated. Juan Melendez. 17 years on FL death row. Burger King burger and fries. 10 in. Dinner plate. 2013*

This visual language is further highlighted when the work is displayed alongside the small collection of plates Green created called *First Meals*, (Hartke 2018) which depict the first meals eaten by prisoners who were exonerated and released from death row. In contrast to the wall of blue and white, these plates feature pops of colour, more pattern, and different text. They demonstrate freedom and individuality, and yet still contain some shocking messages deployed with fast food and sobering text.



Figure 9 Meissen Blue Onion Ceramics, 18th Century to present day. Assorted Sizes. Private Collection.

The material techniques used to create the work could be interpreted as a small act of rebellion, as many works of craft are in response to mass production. “An appreciation for homemade and handmade led me to paint blue food” (Green). Green has possibly chosen this juxtaposition of commercially made plates with a more craft inspired individual decorative approach to render their uniqueness, a slower approach to creating work. Andrew expressed the meaningfulness of our connection to material “...material culture studies examine the relationship between people and objects, it focuses on how the material and the cultural are combined in specific relationships, giving consideration to the influence of context within that relationship, and how cultural influences inform the viewer’s aesthetic perceptions.” (Andrew, 2008: 43).

One could argue that Green was very aware of the material culture that surrounds blue and white plates in the West and has deliberately appropriated this to add further layers of context and meaning to the work.

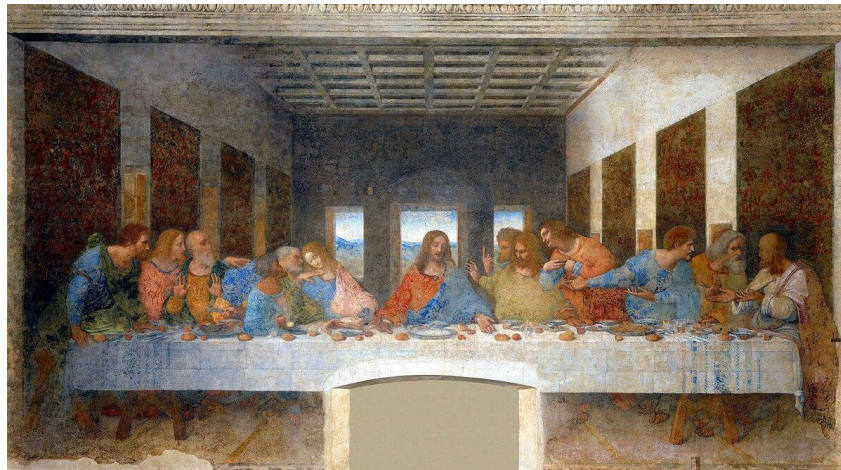


Figure 10 Da Vinci. *The Last Supper*. 1490s. *Experimental pigments on dry plaster*. 700 cm × 880 cm

Greens *The Last Supper* is heavily reliant on the mediation of the title and supporting artist statements (Green, 2021) to decode the full weight of the dominant reading of the work as intended by its creator. Without the clues in the texts included in the artwork and displayed alongside, one would not necessarily realise the narrative is one of prisoners last meals, death, injustice, and humanity. The stark inclusion of statistics in the artists statement lends a scientific, unavoidable confrontation about the reality of the situation. The title “*The Last Supper*” also references the weight of Christian religious belief, in this context it prompts a discourse of forgiveness, a very moving (and contentious) sentiment considering the predominantly 'Christian Morals' of the states that condone and perpetrate the death penalty. This religious connotation, alongside the discourses surrounding fast food and poverty, the stark inclusion of statistics, all add to the wider intertextuality which informs the piece and leaves the viewer with a lot to think about.

In viewing the work through Andrews’ framework, we see how Green has skilfully deployed the power of semiotics to create and transmit layers of meaning in *The Last Supper* in a way that effectively challenges its viewers to deeply contemplate the subject of capital punishment.

The combination of different signifiers across the body of work drives several powerful messages and serves to invoke empathetic and personal responses in many who view the work. This “axis of combination” is one final way of viewing the work - “Few signs have autonomous meaning, and most depend on their relation to other signs within two axes of difference, the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic – or, in other words, the axis of selection and the axis of combination.” (Pajaczkowska, 2009: 3). One uses the axis of selection to interpret certain signifiers, for example the blue and white juxtaposed with the fast-food images, and then analyse the resulting meaning from the combination of these signifiers “...in language there are only differences...meaning is relational, which forces us to interpret concepts and images...in terms of their opposites.” (Berger, 2005:170 in referring to Saussure). This opposition draws you in, engaging the viewer irresistibly and leaving no choice but to question the subject of the work, however no opinions have been given loudly, it deftly engages your own life experiences to prompt deep reflection on your own moral beliefs.

The term craftivism was coined by Betsy Greer in 2003, defining it as “a way of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper”. (Corbett, S 2017 in referring to Greer). Greens work serves as an excellent example of this tactic, and an inspiring invitation to other creators to never underestimate the power that an understanding of semiotics can bring to a work.

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<https://www.galeriewinter.at/kuenstler/lei-xue/drinking-tea/>

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Fig 9. Meissen Blue Onion Ceramics, 18th Century to present day.

<https://www.freemansauction.com/auction/lot/2330-assembled-group-of-meissen-blue-onion-pattern-porcelain-dinnerwares/?lot=461341&sd=1>

Fig 10. Da Vinci. The Last Supper. 1490s. 700 cm × 880 cm

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<https://www.leonardodavinci.net/the-last-supper.jsp#prettyPhoto>

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