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# Reflections on Graffiti

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*Abstract: This work, based on a case study, performs a series of reflections on the plastic qualities of graffiti and, hence, its artistic nature. An extensive description: This proposal integrates different facets of an interdisciplinary analysis conducted on the graffiti expressions of the Santa María la Ribera neighbourhood in Mexico City, one of the biggest cities in the world that is suffering, as any other large city, from enormous visual contamination. These nocturnal manifestos, captured on large and small backgrounds, are a reason for social controversy. Graffiti entails, for some, an expression of aesthetic nature. Plastic characteristics are awarded to it and it is acknowledged in many art schools around the world as one more genre of contemporary art. As a contrast to this thought, there is social criticism toward these manifestations that undoubtedly affect the environment and alter a community's interaction in different ways. From this perspective, graffiti are considered cultural aggression, occult delinquency that is pursued under different modalities of crime in many places around the world. The interpretation of the meaning and transcendence of visual manifestations that have neither academic structures nor social determinants is important because it allows establishing points of view and critical criteria against everyday visual experiences that have no conceptual support. This research opens up an interesting discussion on anonymous graphics, their technical and plastic characteristics, reiterations, meanings and, as a whole, their sense.*

Keywords: Art, Graffiti, Interpretation

## Introduction

**G**RAFFITI IS A phenomenon from the '70s; however, gang graffiti and the definition of its study parameters arrived later on. What is interesting about this type of manifestation is that it can be seen in different ways, from a minor crime to an alternative art form.

Likewise, current graffiti has been compared with plastic expressions from prehistoric times as well as other types of similar vestiges (Cf. Barnard, 2007: 2-15) that supposed a series of early art and communication development processes and not graffiti's intention with its condition of anonymity and search for identity. Hence one must not begin with these anachronisms.



Presented herein is a study case in which all the graffiti in a neighbourhood in Mexico City have been recorded, covering an area defined by geographic and sociocultural limits that make it particularly important for this analysis.



The Santa María la Ribera neighbourhood is considered one of the ten most dangerous neighbourhoods in Mexico City - the most populated city in the world, with over twenty five million inhabitants. In this city, crime has gone up during the last decade increasing the forms and degrees of danger. Drug trafficking and the existence of gangs smuggling stolen merchandise, weapons, piracy and money laundering have formed nuclei of power that the authorities have not managed to control.

This neighbourhood is especially saturated with graffiti, over three thousand, an average of thirty per block, a number that varies due to constant oscillation between those that disappear when inhabitants and business owners paint their properties, and those that appear daily on the walls as renewed pledges that the walls will not remain intact. Either a simple streak, a stain, or an elaborate drawing, block after block, step after step, the eye catches these inscriptions.

### ***Understanding Graffiti***

In this paper it is used the Widdicombe & Wooffit discourse analysis to explore issues of form, rhetorical figures, codes, meaning and sense. For them “this subculture must be acknowledged for what it is” (McDonald, 2002: 149), an illegal confine where we cannot exclude danger, opposition and exclusion.

This study is like a snapshot look at mexican graffiti subculture in its social context. We must recognize that graffiti is a world appart so external criticism, like this work, always distant, realize that researcher view begins by partial and objective approaches.

The first point of view is the form expressed by drawing. Drawing is a practice that mustn't be submitted to banality, because it is a primordial aesthetic experience; it is the original plastic manifestation, the most important resource to educate sight; it reveals expressive statutes that determine the fundamental concepts of plastic



arts It is a process in which the law of exhaustion of forms does not apply because it needs no epigones, it permanently renews the cosmic view of reality, it is a spatiotemporal condensation, the niche of the imaginary of all times that allows for the realization of what Cézanne (Pleyne, 1978: 48), in a rejection of reductionism, demanded of every young person who thinks that he ought not invent everything: “*order especially your brain with the conciliation of different viewpoints*” interrogating the material world and nature, and after determining the expressive resources, ask ‘what do I want?’ and proceed with the “*search from the simple to the complex, to attempt to discover it.*”

The drawing first analysis of photographic graffiti images allows to make the following general description:

- Names painted with different materials, mainly spray, whose typographic variants and content identify the authors either by initials or nicknames, the predominant ones were ZOMBRA, YSF and CNS with 40 graffiti, CKB, SEST, and REC with 28 graffiti, SUNCHING, KDC, GADSS, with 11 graffiti, TOWER and ZO with 6 graffiti.



- Encrypted symbols that point to housing entrances, most with combinations of arrows and letters, arrows and numbers, numbers and letters, spirals and arrows, circles with letters or arrows, squares with letters and numbers.
- Drawings repeatedly exhibiting representations of mushrooms, hearts and cartoon-like characters which, due to their relation to the typography, are interpreted as self-portraits or identities. Those that stand out are a crying Cyclops, a naked man, and a woman in hell. There are also images of faces, profiles, hearts, comic strip bubbles, devils, skulls, and in an isolated manner, a lion, a die, a diamond and a clock.



- Stencils, used especially on ground level, are scarce and show representations of fingers disguised as Zapatistas, stars and logos that belong to the groups that paint them.
- There is only one masterpiece painted on the walls of Museo del Chopo. This graffiti was commissioned by the museum's authorities who paid the graffiti artists for it. This act belonged to a special event on graffiti as art. The walls are fake, and so the drawings will disappear once the building's remodelling is completed. It is interesting the firms zone because the nicknames are clear and without connotations.



In the second analysis step, it was possible to consider the way “images represent the relations between the people, places and the things they depict, and the complex set of relations that can exist between images and their viewers”. (Kress & Leeuwen, 2004: 181)

The patterns in this observation were rhetorical because graffiti presents a parody of hidden identity, and so all its manifestations are discourses highlighting figures and graphic motifs directed toward spectators, whose form, content and intention are not to manage necessary realities but rather refer to basically metaphoric determining factors of the image.

Particularly interesting are the rhetoric resources (Prieto, 1982: 145-153) of substitution that the visual texts of graffiti employ extensively due to the need for concrete references to their own language. The following classification includes the most important rhetoric figures:



Among those of adjunction, achieved through the sum of one or several elements, we have:

- Repetition, which multiplies the presence of the same graphic element in the composition.
- Accumulation, which fill with different types of composition so as to accentuate the sense.

In regards to the suppression figures that result from the subtraction of elements in the composition, the following stand out:

- Synecdoche, which extends, restricts, or alters the meaning, presenting a whole through a part, vice versa, or a thing through the matter that forms it. For example, a letter sometimes means an entire alphabet to the graffiti artist.

There are also substitution figures, the most recurrent being:



Metonymy, a type of metaphor that shows the effect through the cause and vice versa, in this case it is manifested by the avocation of the authors by their nicknames and the substitution of associated symbols.

There are exchange figures, through the reciprocal substitution of functions among graphemes, the most important being:

Visual impact, gradation or gradual transformation of a visual element into another. Some of these figures, like the metonymies, stand out due to their importance in visual text and are used especially in encrypted messages in which geometric elements are employed to refer to actions or functions.

Graffiti is a visual text of fragmented syntax and so its relationships with the receiver are venturesome. The reading route is a fortuitous event that defines partial meanings. Therefore, in this type of communication, the parts show the whole.

In order to give rise to this determinant of interpretation, we begin with what is called a visual map or a hierarchy of contents that represents the space of visualization, the perceptual priorities, and the dominions of vision. Thus it is possible to construct, reconstruct, and de-construct the conditions of sense. These are relationships of the syntax of graphics: of logistics, linked to technical and executorial purposes and operations, corresponding with the actions that are carried out to form graffiti. With these components, arbitrarily iterative events are made possible.

The codes of graffiti are typographic, morphologic and chromatic. The most important characteristics of the object syntax are:

- hierarchies of separation or grouping of element, links, etc.
- transformations that allow reversibility.
- alternative versions or instances that may be explored in parallel.
- multiple visualizations or observation possibilities.
- transit conditions or displacement possibilities.



Syntax shows signs of monotony in shapes, colours and typography. Graffiti writers use in some cases patterns such as carbon copies of old styles. It is possible to observe the same bubble letters, block letters, or the wild style of the sixties (Cf. Kurlanski, 1974,). Likewise, the drawings are limited to the typical caricature-like representations of comic strips, from where elements such as perspective, view, appearance and bubbles are also taken. The textures correspond to those of walls and the chromatic schemes indicate ignorance of harmony and rhyme.

In this analysis, sense is understood as the evidence that fundamentals the intentional task shown as a multiple and complex meaning of graffiti. To interpret it, it is proposed the identification and description of basic cultural units of visual text, and those that, in relationships of different levels, establish graphic repertoires, understood from the concept of visual imagery which, in the framework of visual language and visual text, carries sense because it materializes narrative schemes, regulators of the relationships between different codes, either in formal paths or semantic connections based on possible associations and anchors, which belong to fragments of the cultural visual universe.

Based on a dialectic vision of semantic dynamics, sense is understandable: all meaning creates sense and all sense creates meaning, both culturally expand as sign chains, for which the image of sign plotting is preferred, networks or cobwebs of semiosis that remit to the sense of infinitude and to the infinitude of sense, which are possible only in terms of anticipation. (Vilchis, 2004: 16)



The main sense in graffiti is vandalism, in it lie the meanings of anonymity: the occult and enigmatic, the ignored and unknown. The message is incognito and involves, for the makers, a kind of mystery. However, this sense also entails the meanings of devastation, of implacable destruction of other people's property. These manifestations refer to three transcendent senses:



- Identity, as a set of features that refer to the graffiti writers in the eyes of the community as individuals or groups. Aristotle spoke of identity being equivalent to the essence of being, distinguishing heterogeneity as the “plurality of form, matter or definition” (Aristóteles, 2005: 211), that is, what is different, what can be identical from some point of view having diversity as its essence. It must be noted that graffiti tend to be similar, they do not comply with the requisites of difference that all identity must have. In addition, there is also the graffiti writers' position of remaining in the so-called “underground universe” (Breton, 2000:1).
- Expressivity, which undoubtedly can be found in the morphologic and chromatic variants which, in spite of everything, are not integrated into what Rupert de Ventós named implied art (Rubert de Ventós, 1998 :15) in that it attempts to solve, reform and recreate the context with relevant and articulate forms. Graffiti manifests a low-level of expressivity in that it does not begin with an effort to define and represent concept and sense.



- Communication, as a tacit manifestation of intentionality. In the representation of graffiti, a repertoire of evocations or mnemonic references that are simple in content and complex in form is generated. Graffiti, as signs, symbols and visual texts, are representations that involve the communication of names, forms, and colours that do not manage to enter the social imagery because it is a self-contained system of organization. (Santos Zunzunegui, 1998 :48)

A problem presents itself with the semantic analysis. In most cases, there is no connotation, only denotation and repetition, adding illegibility. Most of the time, it is impossible to translate or understand the textuality and intertextuality. Ryo Sanada postulates that graffiti is the most honest of all art forms:

[...] you don't need to pay an entry fee; you can see it up and down roads, tracksides and parks; it is opened for anyone who is willing to put in the hours; and at the end of the day anyone can criticise it. (sic) (Sanada, 2007: 8)

The problem is that graffiti is available but it is an encrypted language, based in underground groups slang. Graffiti has a multi-leveled idiomatic vocabulary of thousands of words, some obscure and unknown. (Robinson, 2004: 5)



That is why in the pragmatic aspect, graffiti's visual texts have been studied in the links between issuer and receiver, considering communication situations such as: mode, time, place, form, content, intention, conceptions, suppositions and common beliefs, as well as their interaction in the semiotic process.



The pragmatic structure emerges from relationships of proximity, perception and interpretation, which in this case emerge from the anonymity and semantic distance between the issuer and the receiver. The issuer in particular has a biopsychosocial bond with graffiti that involves the sense of insecurity.

Graffiti is a synonym of risk. Commonly, graffiti writers make their drawings at night, with the pressure of time and considering different topics related to danger. Graffiti writers challenge the urban scene, the security and community acceptance at all times.

The most important objective is "gettin' up", which involves marking the greatest amount of space possible in the city. And so, graffiti writers repeat the same element in every available space only to be recognized while remaining anonymous. This is a pragmatic paradox.



The community does not accept graffiti. It tries to fight it by cleaning or covering the marks, sometimes only with lime and water. People, especially elders, dislike how the neighbourhood looks, they feel attacked and offended. They also feel that their right as citizens are violated because their properties are not respected. Of course, they do not accept graffiti as an art manifestation, but rather reject it as a type of vandalism. (Crow, 2008: 113)

As in any textual relationship, the message requires a psychological connection with the receiver. This interaction does not exist even though two types of reading are registered: a *dominant* one because the receiver accepts and reproduces a reading which may not be the result of the author's intention, and a *negotiated* one, where the reader accepts the reading but resists and changes it reflecting his own position.

## Conclusions

Antonio Zaya, Ken Bensinger and other graffiti authors think with conviction that graffiti "in not an anthropological phenomenon to be dissected, not a social malady to be cured, but a legitimate aesthetic and cultural movement, born of a revolutionary spirit and a will of resistance." (Martínez, 2006: Introduction)



Although it was agreed on the idea that the graffiti is a cultural movement, this paper is a discrepancy with Zaya's idea. To understand the visual text that is called graffiti, it must be studied thoroughly from several viewpoints:

- Aesthetic, so as to argue why graffiti is not a paradigm of visual art because its parameters do not correspond with the intervention of form, on the contrary, they refer to repetition schemes including the reiteration of identical figures or figures of minimal equality, with no tension because they do not involve any visual effort.
- Formal, to show that graffiti is an anonymous graphic design pattern that is closer to the typography and developments of comic strips. Among graphic design codes there is the typographic code, and in graffiti it is used in a metalinguistic function with calligraphic, symbolic and ornamental functions. Like comic strips, the characters and codes belong to linear and non-linear narrative genres.

- Sociological, to establish the fundamentals of graffiti as a cliché and a stereotype because it follows the same frameworks with archaic formulas. Graffiti stereotypes support cultural types with ambiguity of presence; they are figures that are opposed to any second reality in a unidirectional process.



- Philosophical, to understand graffiti as a simulation subculture that obeys market games and belongs to complicity with the culture of pretension. The simulation discourse does not communicate anything, it only contributes to the formation of single solitude bonds in which the being justifies to himself his behaviour, his actions, and his “decisions” which are not really decisions because they have not emerged as a result of argumentation or reflection.
- Semeiotics, in that graffiti exhibits the surplus of meaning as a constant. This manifestation establishes the correlation between substances and forms of expression, that is, it explains the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic structures with their cultural contents as well as the possible forms of interpretation.

In any rate, graffiti must be considered a global and social phenomenon that repeats simplified formulas and models. As other subcultural signs, this manifestation follows profound marketing determinants that transform its original status. Nowadays there is a debate between graffiti as a crime and graffiti as an art form, a subject that belongs to the culture of visual literacy.

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