



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)
Issue: Vol. 2; No. 2; February 2020 pp. 11-14
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)
Website: www.jlahnet.com
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com
Doi: 10.48150/jlah.v2no2.2021.a2

Graffiti and visual anthropology of the city

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Summary: Space is a political and ideological concept. (Lefebvre, 1977:341, 1991:278-282). Every order, every constellation of power intervenes in the space and transforms it into the territory to ensure its sustainability and prevent its overcoming. Hence, the territory is the power materialized in space. (Lefebvre, 2009:224). The territory is a politically organized space - a structured system of rules governing the exchange of meaning (culture), the exchange of goods (economy) and personal relations (sociability). At first, the authority trying to control space directly by the visual-aesthetic organization of space. The authority embodies itself in the space by defining and manifesting its power in monumental buildings. In that case, graffiti relativizes the physical control of space. As the visual disruption in the space, graffiti as a youth resistance has a direct connection with the moral disorder. Showing the inability of authority to control the physical space, graffiti takes away sovereignty from the authority in the most explicit way - in those places where authority celebrates its sovereignty through monumental buildings. Second, the authority trying to control space indirectly by standardization psychosocial connection between the meaning, behavior, and space. The authority embodies itself in the space by prescribing what type of behavior is acceptable and appropriate for a particular space. In that case, the presence of graffiti in the public space disturbs the dominant distribution of meaning. Graffiti relativizes the symbolic, social and psychological control over behavior in space, by counteracting the impersonal and static power of authority with the personal and fluid power of Lifeworld. As an act of rebellion and subversion against the authority that embodies its power in space, in the sociological sense graffiti represents the ontological and revolutionary potential of Lifeworld. As a non-territorial, transgressive and heterotopic, graffiti disrupt and prevents power in the continual production of territory. Graffiti deteriorate the space – by graffiti territory has been subjected to processes of destabilization, restructuring, and transformation. In short, graffiti shows that power is losing space.

Keywords: Graffiti, Space, Territory, Power, Youth, Lifeworld, Transgressiveness, Heterotopia.

Introduction

The construction of (urban) space is fundamental to identity because it determines the value system, perception as a way of understanding and the horizon of experience. The difference in the construction of rural and urban space reflects the difference in the construction of urban and rural identity. Urban identity is open, liberal, eccentric, transgressive and fluid. Rural identity is closed, conservative, traditional, ethnocentric and rigid. Graffiti adequately represents the urban identity. As part of urban identity, graffiti its non-territorial, global, transgressive and heterotopic. Therefore, the analysis of graffiti and knowledge of graffiti necessarily includes knowledge about space and analysis of space. The knowledge about space is not only knowledge of space as an abstract principle. It necessarily includes knowledge of power, ideological and material control, which in everyday life and practice, creating values, norms, meanings, and symbols.

Power, space and territory

Space is a political and ideological concept. (Lefebvre, 1977:341, 1991:278-282). Every order, every constellation of power, produces own space to ensure its sustainability and prevent its overcoming. Abstract space is the political product of state spatial strategies—of administration, repression, domination and centralized power. Abstract space is inherently violent and geographically expansive. (Brenner, 2009:359). The presence of power in space always takes the form of strategic intervention. The power performs strategic intervention in the geographical space in the direction of its reorganization. The power intervenes in the geographical space through the processes of fragmentation, hierarchization, and homogenization.

In this way, power institutionalizes geographical space, colonizes geographical space and transforms it into a political space. In short, power is embodied in space and transforms space into the territory.

Space is subsequently transformed into the territory through various political mechanisms, strategies, interventions, and representations (Raffestin 1980:129–130). The dominant authority its power manifests and reified in space in two ways. First, the authority trying to control space directly the visual-aesthetic organization of space. The authority embodies itself in the space by manifesting its power in monumental buildings. Second, authority trying to control space indirectly by prescribing acceptable forms of behavior in a public space. The authority embodies itself in the space by defining meanings in the sense that it prescribes what type of behavior is acceptable and appropriate for a particular space. In this way, an authority not only establishes physical control over space (repressive control of space) but also establishes symbolic, social and psychological control over behavior in space (the metaphysical regulation of behavior in space). By establishing a monopoly of the public (impersonal) over the private (personal), authority is systematically colonizing the Lifeworld.

Hence, the territory is the power materialized in space. There is no state without a territory and there is no territory without a state. The territory is the political form of space produced by and associated with the power (Lefebvre, 2009:224). The territory is a politically organized space - a structured system of rules governing the exchange of meaning (culture), the exchange of goods (economy) and personal relations (sociability). At this point, it becomes visible a substantial connection between the notions of *terror* and *territory*. (Lefebvre 1991:242). The concept of territory already implies the notion of sovereignty as a politically organized and controlled space. Therefore, the idea of the state is inseparable from the idea of a concentration camp (Agamben 1998; 2005). The state and the concentration camp are based on sovereignty as own existential principle. As the primary object of their political power, they have the production of „bare life“. The territory, the prison, the state, and the concentration camp are synonymous - they are just techniques by which the power reduces life as existence (ζῶον) to life as a biological presence (βίος). Consequently, the question of the territory as a relation between the power and space has ontological character because it most directly concerns the idea of life. Hence, the answer to the question of territory as a relation between the power and space must be ontological - it must consist of a transgressive and heterotopic negation of the idea of territory as a spatial form of power.

Graffiti

Graffiti has an ontological and political function. The power in modern society seeks to produce, preserve and expand its control of the space, transforming space into a territory by different spatial strategies that transform space into a manageable and calculable category. The power regulates space - regulates the contents of the space, sterilizes the space and transforms the space into a function and production category. At the same time, different social forces are trying to create, defend and expand the free (non-colonized) space of social everyday life. One of these practices of creating, defense and expansion of free space of the social everyday life its graffiti. As a non-territorial, transgressive and heterotopic, graffiti disrupt and prevents power in the continual production of territory. Graffiti deteriorate the space – by graffiti territory has been subjected to processes of destabilization, restructuring, and transformation. Graffiti shows that power is losing space. Finally, graffiti is becoming a form of resistance to terror. Understanding of graffiti is an „understanding of the challenges addressed to the hegemonic orthodoxy of the homogenizing practices of planning, design, commerce, and the overarching concern with risk assessment and avoidance, surveillance, order and security, and the needs of capital to create conditions for maximizing profit.“ (Zieleniec, 2018:5). Hence, the policy of urban development is not just a practice of space functionalization than much more – its a development strategy of Lebensraum (space, not a territory, necessary for survival).

Modern graffiti is a quintessential universal urban phenomenon (Zieleniec, 2016: 1). In the sociological sense, graffiti represent the ontological and revolutionary potential of Lifeworld. They should be understood as an act of rebellion and subversion against the Systematic colonization of the Lifeworld – as an intervention in the practice of everyday urban life that attempts to make and use urban space to represent more than merely the interests of capital, finance or institutional power (Zieleniec, 2016). The authority trying to control space directly by defining and manifesting its power in monumental buildings (by the visual-aesthetic organization of space). In that case, graffiti relativizes the physical control of space. As the visual disruption in the space, graffiti has a direct connection with the moral disorder. Showing the inability of authority to control the physical space, graffiti takes away sovereignty from the authority in the most explicit way - in those places where authority celebrates its sovereignty through monumental buildings.

The authority trying to control space indirectly by prescribing acceptable forms of behavior in a public space (by standardization psychosocial connection between the meaning, behavior, and space). In that case, the presence of graffiti in the public space disturbs the dominant distribution of meaning. Graffiti relativizes the symbolic, social and psychological control of behavior in space, because as a practice of personal and free symbolic marking of public spaces, graffiti contrasts the impersonal and static power of authority with the personal and fluid power of subordinates, showing that this marked space does not belong to the sterile and impersonal authority that juristically claim it, but to them - to the people who live there every day. In both cases, graffiti represents the triumph of the individual over the monuments of authority, the triumph of the name over the nameless. (Zieleniec, 2016).

As a symbolic and moral challenge to the dominant constellation of power, graffiti can be an indicator of urban identity because, as an expression of the modern urban condition, they represent a clash over the use and exchange values of social and public space (Zieleniec, 2016: 4). Hence, the negative perceptions and negative attitudes toward graffiti, or the absence of graffiti in urban space as such, can be an indicator of the crisis of urban identity, because they reflect the absence of rebellion space as the humanistic-emancipatory potential of Lifeworld. The negative perceptions and negative attitudes toward graffiti, or the absence of graffiti in urban space is an inability to see that dichotomy between private and public space represent an inherent feature of the city and the urban (Craswel, 1996: 31-61).

Transgressiveness and Heterotopia

The negative attitude towards graffiti lies in the rejection of their disruptive nature. The metaphorical interpretation of graffiti in the categories of garbage, contagion, dirt, obscenity, violence, epidemics, etc., indicates that graffiti does not belong to „this place“, but as something else, as alien and foreign, they disturb the established aesthetic, symbolic and moral order. The understanding of graffiti in value-negative categories is inherent to any self-centered conception of identity (ethnocentric, racial-centric, economic-centric, etc.), and it is essentially a conservative reaction generated by the fear of losing control and by the sense of deep vulnerability. Thus, for example, the reactions of the American public on the first graffiti that appeared in New York City in the 1960s were negative and generated by racial-centric fear. Graffiti has been described as a mass of dirty, obscene and madness metaphors that do not belong to the public space that as such threatens to public space because they belong to „another place“, and that, as plague and infestation, spreading itself the countries of the Third World, disrupting the environment, threatening order and causing moral destruction by bringing the Otherness and Foreign. (Craswel, 1996: 31-61).

In this sense, understanding of graffiti as dirt, plague, disease, and madness, actually explains their transgressive and heterotopic nature and essence: “Dirt is something in the wrong place or wrong time. The meaning of dirt is dependent on its location. Because dirt appears where it shouldn't, it lies at the bottom of a hierarchical scale of values. Removing dirt is part of the establishment of an ordered environment. We make the environment conform to an idea, a sense of order. Dirt is "matter out of place," a definition that suggests simultaneously some form of order and a contravention of that order. Dirt depends on the preexistence of a system, a mode of classification” (Cresswell, 1996:38).

Also, graffiti, understood as an infection implies the contamination of the city body. The infection is the result of an invasion of foreign objects, which by the nature of things, belong somewhere else, and which as such (foreign and ill) do not belong to us, do not belong to a particular place, do not belong to the body of the city. Graffiti interpreted as an infection produces a simple conclusion - the body of the city is sick. Also, the description of graffiti in the meaning of the plague implies a foreign origin. In the same sense, an understanding of graffiti in the categories of health and madness shows that the distribution of health depends on the correlation between moral and physical environment (Foucault, 1967).

The negative attitude towards graffiti lies in a specific perception of their function. The heterotopic nature of graffiti is evident in the fact that they have two opposite functions at the same time. In the same time, they represent the privatization of public space and they make space social and public: „Graffiti can be understood in terms of making and owning space, however temporary, but in the same time, graffiti makes space social and public, through the promotion of use-values and meaningful acts of colonization and inhabitation versus the homogenizing practices of planning, design, commerce, and their overarching concern with surveillance, order, and security. That is, to read graffiti as a means for reclaiming and remaking the city as a more humane and just, social space“ (Zieleniec, 2016:1-2).

Also, the heterotopic character of graffiti is evident in their dual nature: „On the one hand portrayed and understood as an expression of a vibrant urban street life and culture, an important practice in the creation of subcultural and youth identity, as urban decoration and quotidian art in the streets, representation of youth, urbanity, and creativity. On the other hand, it is viewed as vandalism, anti-social deviant behavior, the symbol of community breakdown and decline, symptom of urban blight, a lack of direction, discipline and deviance in youth.“ (Zieleniec, 2016:3).

The negative attitude towards graffiti lies in the specific sens and understanding of the environment. Children of rural social origin and children of the urban social origin do not have the same perception of the environment (Williams, 1990:157-162). The reason for the negative perception of graffiti by the population with rural social origin lies in the fact that in the village there is no public space. Therefore, there is no graffiti in the countryside. Modern graffiti is a quintessential universal urban phenomenon (Zieleniec, 2016: 1). As a symbolic and moral challenge to the dominant constellation of power, graffiti can be an indicator of urban identity because, as an expression of the modern urban condition, they represent a clash over the use and exchange values of social and public space (Zieleniec, 2016: 4). Hence, the negative perception towards graffiti or the absence of graffiti as such, can be an indicator of the crisis of urban identity, because the negative attitude towards graffiti or their absence in the public space reflects the inability to see that dichotomy between private and public space, represent an inherent feature of the city and the urban (Craswel, 1996: 31-61).

The negative attitude towards graffiti lies in the traditional and closed system of perception, rigid and structured value system, psychologically submissive attitude towards authority and rudimentary aesthetics. The rural symbolic space is based on the authority of tradition and the past. The system of values and the system of perception in rural space is closed, static and conservative. Ethnocentrism, collectivism, and tribalism are the dominant forms of identification and sociability. Religious objects have a central place in the organization of the rural environment. The basic psychological characteristic is the fear of foreign that threatens the order. On the contrary, the urban symbolic space is based on the idea of openness. The system of values and the system of perception in urban space is inclusive, dynamic and fluid. Individualism is the dominant form of identification and sociability. Secular objects have a central place in the organization of the urban environment. The basic psychological characteristics are rebellion against authority.

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