



Justifying graffiti: (Re)defining societal codes through orders of worth



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ABSTRACT

Graffiti is often defined through the broken window theory that states areas with graffiti will be riddled with other types of crime. This concern continues at a time when some graffiti writers are gaining recognition and viewed as serious artists in certain art circles. This paper looks at US news coverage of graffiti in 2012 to investigate how graffiti is being framed in a public arena. The typical framing is that graffiti is a crime and this is justified through a civic order of worth that fits with the broken window theory. There are, however, instances of graffiti being framed as something else. The various justifications are analyzed to better understand the broader portrayal of this art form.

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1. Introduction

The art world is dependent on codes. Monet, Rembrandt, and Van Gogh are code for classic artists, Viola, Fox, and Doherty for video artists, and O'Keeffe, Hesse, and Chicago for female artists. These codes are often tied to other codes including museums, galleries, masterpieces, and fine art. Banksy, Risk, Saber, murals, and writers are tied to a code often connected to vandalism, neighborhood degradation, gang activities, and street art. This latter code, often discussed through the broken window theory in the sense that where graffiti is rampant so is crime and violence and vice versa (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), is rarely thought of as fine art. Graffiti, however, has become chic in numerous circles, and one can now purchase books at reputable bookstores that outline the history of graffiti and the works of contemporary graffiti writers such as Banksy's *Wall and Piece*, even though much of what is contained in those

pages are pictures of illegal modifications to public and private property. This paper looks at how graffiti is covered in newspapers from the perspective of justifications used by reporters and their sources who seek to define why these images exist, as well as the actions tied to these activities.

This study begins with a discussion of language as a group marker to understand the codes of social order and social breakdown, followed by work on art codes before turning to the language of justifications and how these can be used in stories about graffiti. This is followed by an analysis of newspaper articles from across the US that reported on this topic in 2012.

2. Background

Language is an important group signifier (Ogunnaiké, Dunham, & Banaji, 2010). Codes are engaged to help users distinguish subtleties of membership within various groups in everyday life, such as determining ethnicities, religions, political affiliations, generations, and occupational groups (Derrida, 1978). A word as common as structure, for example, is both a marker for what it defines

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as well as a structure itself, partially in terms of how it is used by members in specified groups. A sociologist and an architect are likely to use the term in different ways. The word play is different for the stage actress and the daycare worker. Understanding how a word is used within contexts often distinguishes membership within and between groups.

Meanings of words are not static even within a group. Foucault (2010) argues that many boundaries created and maintained by words are relatively weak. This can be partly explained by desire, as humans seek that which they do not have or have but want more (Foucault, 1972), and language plays a role in determining whether a desire has been fulfilled. One cannot tell others – or one's self – of desires, conquests, and failures without a level of malleability in language.

Foucault contends that language becomes a vehicle of power, an aspect of the social environment that many individuals and groups desire. This is a challenge to the Marxist model of power found in the ownership of production, though one could argue that economic resources provide greater opportunities to learn specific languages of power (Bourdieu, 1984). Production is not tied to economic wealth in areas such as the arts. Artists such as Van Gogh, Vermeer, and Gauguin died poor or dealt with poverty at some point while they were producing art. Owning works by these individuals, however, and more importantly for the purpose of this paper, being able to speak correctly about art, defines one as wealthy or having come from a wealthy background (Becker, 1982; Ten Eyck & Christensen, 2012). The ability to distinguish Manet's life and work from that of Monet, to understand the differences between Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, or to know the properties of both acrylic and oil paints in terms of physical properties and economic value are, among other things, signifiers of one's membership in the art world. Contending that Monet painted *Olympia* and Manet the water lilies would be to show ignorance within this social sphere, and, therefore, open to ridicule by insiders. Mistaking Banksy's stencils for Risk's aerosol art would prove the same thing in the street art scene.

The term street art, in fact, is often differentiated from graffiti and other activities by legal, semi-legal, and illegal activities. A busker with a license to play music in New Orleans's French Quarter is different than a group of kids who decide to make some quick cash by playing tambourines and tap dancing with bottle caps attached to the soles of their shoes. Tourists may see both groups as street performers, but there are differences in the eyes of the performers and police. The artist who sets up her paintings in Jackson Square after the sun goes down is different than the graffiti writer who tags an abandoned building on the corner of N. Rampart and Kerlerec St., though both are using paint mediums to change the color of a surface. A legal work of art can be disputed or misinterpreted, as commissioned murals have been mistaken for graffiti and covered with primer, and statues of Christopher Columbus have been attacked due to the representation of European colonialism and the genocide of Native Americans.

An understanding of differences in art forms comes from, in part, an understanding of the language that is used

in conjunction with practices (Goodman, 1968). The same is true when distinguishing between community-building and social degeneration, a distinction captured by Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) civic order of worth. Orders of worth, of which the civic order is one of six, are used to justify actions. The other orders include inspired with values related to grace and creativity, market with values related to exchanges, industrial with values related to efficiency, renown with values related to recognition, and domestic orders with values related to tradition. The civic order of worth is related to collective interests, and for this work, community rituals.

It is expected that language tied to graffiti will be linked to many of these orders of worth. A discussion of Banksy's stencils being worth thousands of dollars, for example, would fall under the market order of worth. The main focus in this article is to analyze how reporters and their sources use these orders of worth to justify actions tied to graffiti. This will include language tied to both creating and destroying the work, much of which falls into the civic order of worth. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) contend that the mode of evaluation in this order is collective interest. That which benefits the community is likely to be considered of higher value than that which benefits the individual. Information within this order of worth travels through formal channels and officials, so credible sources are those who are tied to organizations expected to maintain collective interests such as government officials and religious leaders. The most important relation in the civic order of worth is solidarity where people find ways to build consensus and agreement among a disparate set of actors. The standard of qualification is equality, as collective interests are best served through democratic processes. Civics is a function that is found within other forms of governing, but an argument can be made that the civic order is best served when it involves a large portion of the population that will be impacted by civic decisions.

The language tied to the civic order of worth will contain terms such as solidarity, officials, and so forth, though antonyms are also part of this order. The justification for saying graffiti is destroying a neighborhood stems from the civic order of worth because the concern is with the lack of solidarity and collective interest. It stems from the same order of worth as a statement about a neighborhood rallying around graffiti or its abatement. This is true of all orders of worth, as each is a continuum on the dimensions of evaluation, relevant information, relationships, and human qualifications.

The community ritual aspect of this particular language stems from the fact that graffiti is often tied to neighborhoods or sections of cities (Ferrell & Weide, 2010). Graffiti becomes a marker for many as to the level of civility within the area where it is found, though as Ferrell and Weide point out, the placement of graffiti provides insights into the writer's level of competency and willingness to take risks. Graffiti is attributed to the area and practitioners when it appears. In this sense, it is part of the community, and the rituals that are tied to it will be symbolic of the solidarity of various vested interests.

Justifications become part of the issue culture as an order of worth is used to justify actions and picked up by the

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